

Charlottesville and Staunton transportation groups meet to discuss collaboration  
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On Thursday, two federally-mandated groups that make transportation decisions for Charlottesville and Staunton met for the first time. The leaders of the Central Shenandoah and the Thomas Jefferson Planning District commissions discussed ways to increase cooperation to help people who commute across Afton Mountain.

"A lot of people travel over the mountain on the Interstate 64 and U.S. 250 corridors," said Jeffrey Moore, an Augusta County supervisor who serves as chairman of the Staunton-Augusta-Waynesboro Metropolitan Planning Organization.

The two groups recently applied for a grant to start a joint planning exercise to study how those two roads might be improved. Though they were not successful, they plan to continue working together.

"There are so many commonalities both infrastructure-wise as well as people between the two areas," said Chip Boyles, the executive director of the planning district commission, which oversees the Charlottesville-Albemarle MPO.

"We really need to spend more time talking with each other and, hopefully, build some more formal mechanisms so we can review each other's plans," he added.

Bonnie Riedesel, the executive director of the Central Shenandoah group, lives in Batesville but has commuted to the valley for 21 years.

"I go through four different jurisdictions on my way to work," Riedesel said. "As transportation planners, elected officials and community leaders, when we're looking at commuting and getting to where we need to get, we need to break down the jurisdictional boundaries and work together."

More than 400,000 people live in the Charlottesville, Harrisonburg and Staunton metropolitan areas.

"I think proximity is a real strength that we can play on," said Kevin McDermott, the administrator of the Staunton-area MPO. "If we can open up our transportation lines, then we open up housing opportunities and job opportunities."

McDermott is working on a plan for interregional transit between the three metro areas.

"What we want to do now is look at the feasibility of implementation of service between those three major metropolitan areas," McDermott said.

Intercity rail is not a component of the plan, much to the chagrin of Albemarle Supervisor Ann H. Mallek.

"Our community here is certainly interested in that," Mallek said.

Boyles said his organization is looking at ways to increase transit services in Charlottesville and Albemarle at the direction of the Planning and Coordination Council.

"They have asked that an independent review be given into the organizational changes that may could occur within the regional area where we currently have four transit providers serving now," Boyles said.

They are the Charlottesville Area Transit, JAUNT, University Transit System and Greene County Transit.

The eastern edge of the Staunton MPO is only 12 miles away from the western edge of the Charlottesville MPO.

Transportation planner Will Cockrell said the two seem further away because of the mountain chain separating the two regions.

"In terms of roadways, that's not a barrier at all," Cockrell said. "There aren't a lot of congestion issues in this corridor. At the same time, as congestion issues do arise, there's not a lot you can do about it."

A Virginia Department of Transportation representative said he was glad the meeting took place.

"I really appreciate the opportunity to be part of this and to get these two policy boards together," said Randy Kiser, an engineer in VDOT's Staunton district. "It's always better to communicate early and often to try to work out issues instead of having to learn about those things in the local newspapers."

Kiser said his goal would be to try to avoid the need to add any more lanes to I-64 over Afton Mountain.

"That would be a lot more expensive than U.S. 29," Kiser said, referring to the several projects currently underway in Albemarle County.

The two groups plan to meet again next year.

