

Traffic model challenges benefits of Sunset-Fontaine Connector  
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The benefits of the proposed Sunset-Fontaine Connector might not be as significant as once thought, Albemarle County planning staff said Tuesday.

The connector road was called for in the 2004 Southern Urban Area B Study, which produced a framework for, among other things, transportation plans in an area near the University of Virginia and the border between Albemarle and Charlottesville. The road would link residential neighborhoods off Old Lynchburg Road in the county's growth area to employment centers at UVa and the Fontaine Research Park.

"What we found was that the traffic generated does not necessitate that this road be built," Albemarle senior planner Andrew Sorrell said.

"It's got some negative impacts to Fontaine," Sorrell added, "but generally [there are] less than 3,000 trips [per day] on Old Lynchburg Road [south of Interstate 64], and the [connector] would be designed to carry 16,000 trips."

In 2009 and 2010, county staff and the Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission modeled traffic projections through 2040 incorporating planned developments and existing land uses.

Stephen Williams, executive director of the TJPDC, said that staff conducted the traffic modeling prior to the temporary closing of the Jefferson Park Avenue bridge and while UVa was in session.

With respect to how the connector would alleviate traffic, Williams said there would be little change in the level of service.

"Without the Sunset-Fontaine Connector, Old Lynchburg Road near its intersection with Sunset Avenue, is just below 100% of capacity, which is level of service D," Williams said.

"The addition of the connector only decreases the traffic on the road by a matter of 2,700 - 3,000 vehicles per day, which drops it down to 85% - 87% of capacity, which means that you're probably at a low C or a high D," Williams added.

Additionally, Williams said that the connector would "significantly worsen the level of service" near the research park.

County staff did, however, recommend obtaining the right of way for the road and using it as a bicycle and pedestrian route until traffic levels necessitate a vehicular thoroughfare.

Charlottesville City Councilor Kathleen M. Galvin, who worked on the Area B study before joining council, argued that the vehicular connector was needed.

She also commented on the proposal's practicality.

"When have any of you seen a vehicular road go in after a residential development has been made," Galvin said. "It's going to be nearly impossible after there's any development on the Granger site."

Stribling Holdings LLC has a plan to build 79 single-family homes on the Granger property near the

intersection of Sunset Avenue and the proposed Sunset-Fontaine Connector.

Albemarle's director of planning Wayne Cilimberg noted that one major hurdle the connector faces is the cost of crossing the CSX railroad near Fontaine Research Park, combined with the lack of funding from the Virginia Department of Transportation for the project.

"This road was never meant to be funded by VDOT, but rather by a private developer by way of a proffer agreement during a re-zoning," Galvin said. "This is the time you have for leverage."

But county principal planner Elaine Echols pointed out that the county cannot expect the developer to proffer the railroad crossing, the most expensive section of the road, because that property owner will be developing by-right.

Leverage for developer proffers comes with a rezoning request. The last opportunity for that was when Albemarle County approved an expansion of the research park in late 2010 with only a requirement that UVa set aside land for a portion of the road, not a contribution to a future railroad crossing.

Now Echols says it is more likely that the road will take a piecemeal approach, with the bridge crossing coming at a later date.

"The reality is that there is a good chance that we're going to get that road in place through [another] by-right development," Echols said. "What we've seen on those preliminary plats, and it's a risk we take, but what we've seen shows the appropriate road connections and locations."

"I think we may be building interconnections, just not getting the [the railroad crossing] in the near future," Echols added.

Commissioner Don Franco argued for beginning construction and addressed the need to start figuring out how many lanes the road would have.

"I like the idea of building the roads that can be built now. My point is that we need to understand what type of road this is going in so we can give that guidance idea to the developer," Franco said.

Commissioner Rick Randolph criticized the vehicular model.

"Our existing model is bankrupt," Randolph said. "A model that brings more cars for more highways that would bring more cars isn't going to work. Light rail is something that might work for this road."