



February 13, 2009

The Honorable Eugene A. Conti, Jr., Secretary
North Carolina Department of Transportation
1501 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, NC 27699-1501

Dear Secretary Conti:

Re: City of Charlotte Input – North Carolina Transportation Reform

Thank you for your letter of January 28 asking for comments on reforming the transportation planning process in North Carolina. We commend Governor Purdue's interest in improving the decision-making process by the Board of Transportation and the NCDOT. We share her interest in providing transportation in a more equitable, transparent, and efficient manner. We also are impressed with your commitment of "ascertaining transportation needs and the alternative means to provide those needs through an integrated transportation system". We believe that enacting the right transportation reforms and committing to an integrated transportation system is critical to making North Carolina's economy more competitive. These reforms also are important for deriving more efficiency in funding allocations and delivering a sustainable investment strategy. We are committed to working with you to facilitate substantive and long-lasting reforms.

We are recommending the following four basic reforms for your consideration:

- Ask the BOT to set a vision that celebrates North Carolina as the diverse state it has become. Create a policy framework for making planning and design decisions that recognize the distinctions between rural areas, towns and cities/metropolitan areas. We know that a "one size fits all" approach will not work for North Carolina. Planning and design solutions should fit the unique character of the various parts of the state.
- In all areas of North Carolina, NCDOT should diligently apply Context Sensitive Design solutions in planning and designing its projects. Communities across America and a number of state DOTs (such as in Florida, Massachusetts, Oregon, and California) have adopted "complete streets" requirements for their roadway projects. NCDOT tends to apply a "one size fits all" approach to roadway design that fails to distinguish among roadways in the various rural, suburban or urban contexts. As our state continues to grow, it is increasingly important for the state's transportation infrastructure to support state and local development visions and design expectations. We would like to work with you to demonstrate how a process of context-based design could increase the long-term efficiency and sustainability of transportation investments.
- Rely more on MPOs and large cities. Since 1991, federal transportation authorization bills provided MPOs a larger role in establishing a planning framework and setting funding priorities through their long range plans and Transportation Improvement Programs. The State of North Carolina, unlike most other states, never fully subscribed to the congressional intent outlined in the last three authorization bills.

The Honorable Eugene A. Conti, Jr.


Page 2

February 13, 2009

- MPOs, the Board of Transportation (BOT), and NCDOT should work more collaboratively to make more effective planning and programming decisions. MPOs are closer to the issues affecting urban areas. They can more effectively adopt and apply criteria and prioritization methods to resolve the complicated tradeoffs involved in making transportation planning and programming decisions. We would like to work with you to improve NCDOT's collaboration and coordination with MPOs and large cities. We believe that MPOs and large cities should be treated as true transportation partners with greater involvement in making transportation decisions. Cities such as Raleigh, Charlotte, Winston-Salem and others have qualified staff who could function as NCDOT's agents for planning, permitting, buying rights of way and building state facilities. NCDOT should develop a program to certify competent local governments to undertake state projects.
- We encourage aggressive decentralization of decision-making within NCDOT. For NCDOT to communicate effectively with MPOs and local transportation staffs, decision-making should be decentralized from Raleigh to the division and district offices. Too often, NCDOT's district and division staffs cannot make key (or even routine) decisions, requiring local customers to travel to Raleigh to "plead their cases" for local transportation issues. We hear constant complaints about the excessive time NCDOT takes to approve projects when Raleigh staff are involved. We believe that providing greater decision-making powers to the division and district offices would result in more efficient, collaborative and cost-effective planning, programming and design of transportation projects. Plus it would improve good will among NCDOT and local staffs.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide our comments on the reforms proposed for North Carolina's transportation decision-making process. I look forward to working with you to help implement these changes. If you have questions or would like to discuss our ideas in more detail, please contact me at 704-336-3879.

Sincerely,



Danny C. Pleasant, AICP
Director

c: The Honorable Patrick L. McCrory, Jr., Mayor
Charlotte City Council Members
Marion A Cowell, Jr., Member, NC Board of Transportation, Division 10
Barry Moose, P.E., Division Engineer, NCDOT, Division 10
Robert Cook, AICP, Secretary, Mecklenburg-Union Metropolitan Planning Organization

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