

TOWN OF HILLSBOROUGH



Downtown Hillsborough Access Study/Improvements

Study website: <http://www.ci.hillsborough.nc.us/content/downtown-study-fall-2011>

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In 2009, NCDOT was nearing completion of the environmental documents for project U-3808, the Elizabeth Brady Road extension. This long-planned road was intended to relieve congestion on NC 86 which runs through the heart of historic downtown Hillsborough as Churton Street, functioning as the town's main street. Two of the alternatives required a new bridge over the Eno River. The statement of purpose and need for the project was two-pronged: 1) Reduce traffic congestion and improve the Level of Service in the central business district of the Town of Hillsborough, including Churton Street and St. Mary's Road, and 2) Improve traffic safety along NC 86. NCDOT approached the Town and MPO about amending the Purpose and Need because none of the modeled options could predict an improvement in the LOS in downtown. The Town began to question the wisdom of a significant financial and environmental cost for limited benefit. The Town notified NCDOT of their support of the No-Build alternative and work on the project was halted. This left the town with congestion issues in downtown with no improvement in sight.

Downtown Hillsborough has been an increasingly attractive destination for both locals and tourists in recent years due to its commercial and arts-based vitality. Monthly community arts events, weekly farmers market, sidewalk dining, renowned restaurants side by side with municipal and county offices and other businesses all keep downtown Hillsborough full of people, both in cars and on foot. In 2007, the town was named one of the Dozen Distinctive Destinations in the nation by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and in 2012, the North Carolina Chapter of the American Planning Association named downtown Hillsborough as one of the six "Great Places" in the state.

Downtown Hillsborough has been the site of many new building projects in the early 2000s. Orange County has expanded its justice facility and constructed a 4 story office building along with a new public library. Downtown is also the site of a new community based co-op grocery which serves as a central gathering point for customers and the community. Property owners have made conscious efforts to attract retail and restaurants to support the real estate and law offices common in a county seat. This economic development and densification of land use has had a marked impact on the confined transportation system, including public transit. The Town has cautiously supported the redevelopment of certain tracts when the existing development did not reflect the historic character of the town and the new development was more consistent. As its own water and sewer utility, the town is mindful of the desirability of sustainable and compact development patterns. Balancing that interest with maintaining the small town and low density character of the historic district is a challenge.



The context of downtown was critical to the scope and direction and greatly improved the outcome of this process. Late in the Brady extension planning process, the town began to get feedback from citizens that congestion was an acceptable outcome. Both citizens and businesses acknowledged that traffic in downtown was very important to its vitality and they could agree that the issue had become protecting vitality and pedestrians rather than simply moving cars. That shift in focus allowed everyone to stop trying to find a route on the map to move the cars to and focus on making the congested experience reasonable and safe.

With the support of the MPO, the town authorized a study of downtown access with a focus on managing existing traffic and improving livability rather than finding a "bypass" route. Unlike many studies, while this one wanted to address traffic congestion, the solutions were not to be at the expense of quality of life aspects like walkability, commercial vitality, or historic character. The following charge was given to responding consultants for the downtown study: A Downtown Traffic Demand Management and efficiency assessment to include looking at signalization (timing, synchronization and dedicated left turns), turn lanes, on street parking (possible removal of), transit and traffic calming to both improve the flow but maintain community character in the historic downtown core. The result should take into consideration a fine grain look at origins and destinations for travelers. Current and proposed transit service needs to be analyzed including potential impacts of changing headways.

This new study was reliant on stakeholder feedback. Previous corridor planning efforts for the town were generally larger scaled and thoroughfare plans often became politically charged around the Brady extension issue. Downtown had never received detailed attention to look for citizen-based solutions. This process involved a series of both stakeholder and general citizen sessions. The report includes all the suggestions from citizens and many were translated into workable and feasible improvements. The town involved downtown residents, business owners, property owners, and advocates for alternate modes of travel during the planning process. These were identified by staff while defining the context and scope. The context was defined before the project was even initiated.

Our selected consultant, Kimley Horn and Associates, proposed a CSS process, which is one of the reasons the firm was selected. They combined detailed and innovative data collection with a process heavy on participation and feedback. The process had a series of focus group meetings and a general input meeting one day, followed by a work day, and finished with another general public review of both the comments and recommendations. The final meeting included a prioritization process to help guide the expenditure of funds.

Since there was significant citizen participation in crafting and prioritizing the recommendations, as we are moving toward implementation, there remains strong and enthusiastic support for the recommended improvements in the plan. NCDOT has been very supportive of the implementation of the recommendations. In coordinating implementation with NCDOT we have been able to time and partner on implementation. A complete resurfacing of Churton Street is planned soon, and we plan to complete the recommended curb relocations and new crosswalks to allow the work to flow in the proper order and benefit from NCDOT financial participation.

Key Plan recommendations include:

- Removal of approximately 10 on-street parking spaces to widen sidewalks and allow for crosswalks to become ADA compliant.
- Rearrangement of a major off-street parking lot.
- Creation of delivery parking spaces.
- Creation of stamped asphalt crosswalks at key intersections.
- Completion of sidewalk connections between key destinations.
- Visual narrowing of a residential portion of the corridor to slow traffic and increase pedestrian safety.