Updated West Piedmont Regional Bicycle Plan Adopted

The updated West Piedmont Regional Bicycle Plan was adopted at the February Board meeting of the West Piedmont Planning District Commission (WPPDC). This document is an update of the 2005 plan which served as the region’s first bicycle plan, created jointly by the WPPDC and Kimley-Horn consultants.

The plan update process began in March 2017, and required nearly one year to complete. This updated plan consists of four chapters. The first chapter presents the background and development of the plan. The second chapter’s focus is economic development and public health. Much of the third chapter captures the vast array of bicycling facilities—including trails, roadway shoulders that can be used for cycling, bike lanes, etc.—which are present throughout the West Piedmont Planning District, as well as current planning activities in the region having bicycle components. The fourth chapter, which could be considered the heart of this plan, articulates priority and vision recommendations at both the regional and local levels. Priority recommendations include those that can reasonably be expected to be implemented in the foreseeable future, whereas vision recommendations are more aspirational and long-term. This chapter also briefly summarizes the results of a survey used to solicit input for this plan, as well as examples of a variety of bicycle infrastructure and their associated cost estimates, where available.

Now for the first time, this updated bicycle plan includes an interactive map link which includes recommended bicycle routes, destinations for bicyclists to patronize, and links to other pertinent sites. Many of these destinations were developed as part of Virginia’s West Piedmont Local Food Guide. Destinations include such establishments and institutions as breweries/wineries, museums, parks, farmers’ markets, restaurants, bed & breakfasts, libraries, and campgrounds, to name a few. When one of these points is selected, a description dialogue box will appear which provides information about the type of destination, its address, the locality in which it is located, contact information, and a website if available. The lines portraying the recommended routes are also selectable, and information such as the road name, speed limit, annual average daily traffic (AADT), and surface type are shown where available. Selective map backgrounds with options for topographic features, aerals, and other choices are also provided. See the accompanying graphic for an example. In addition to providing bicyclists with points of interest, the interactive features of this map (particularly with regard to the destinations) can be a powerful economic development tool for our region, as visitors from outside the region choose to explore what our localities have to offer bicyclists. The link for the interactive map is https://arcg.is/0emDaW. The written portion of this plan can be accessed at http://www.wppdc.org/content/wppdc/uploads/PDF/docs_publications/transportation/wppd__regional_bicycle_plan_final.pdf.
On Tuesday, March 6, a public input meeting was hosted by VDOT at the Brossville Elementary School. The meeting was held in Pittsylvania County to solicit input for the programmed intersection improvements at U.S. Route 58 Business and Berry Hill Road (Route 311), attended by Danville MPO staff. The project involves reconfiguring the northbound portion of the intersection to create a channelized right-turn lane, a left-through lane, and a left-turn lane. Changes to the eastbound portion of the intersection will involve modifications to existing turn lanes so as to enhance their capacity and function. Finally, the existing traffic signal will be replaced to adhere to the requirements of the reconfigured intersection.

The purpose of the improvements to this intersection is to provide adequate capacity for additional vehicles as the nearby Berry Hill Industrial Park develops. While these improvements will not adequately address later development stages of the industrial park, they will be imperative for the initial development of the site. The Average Annual Daily Traffic (AADT) at this intersection was 12,820 in 2016, but in 2042 is expected to handle 18,820 vehicles daily. The programmed improvements at the intersection are anticipated to accommodate up to 2,200 workers at the industrial park. Therefore, these transportation improvements will not only be essential to acceptable traffic circulation as the industrial park develops, but may be instrumental in attracting initial investment to the site as well. The estimated cost of the project is $3.3 million, including about $412,000 for preliminary engineering, $478,031 for right-of-way acquisition, and approximately $2.4 million for construction.

The Danville Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), staffed by the West Piedmont Planning District Commission (WPPDC), submitted a Smart Scale application in September 2016, which was selected by the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) to be funded. Smart Scale is a relatively new data-driven funding mechanism in the Commonwealth of Virginia which, in the West Piedmont Planning District, ranks five factors including a project’s likely impact on economic development, safety, accessibility, congestion mitigation, and environmental features. The project is scheduled to go out to bid to interested construction firms in March 2020, and it is anticipated to be completed by November of that year.

The environmental review process for this project has been completed and involved analysis of potential impacts the project may have on a multitude of environmental features including air, water, threatened and endangered species, etc. Following the review, a Categorical Exclusion was issued, which simply declares that the project will not have any significant impacts on the environment. As noted above, some right-of-way acquisition will be required for the project, but such acquisition will not involve the condemnation of any structures such as businesses or residences. The public input period recently ended on March 16.
Danville MPO Updates Transportation Analysis Zones for Transportation Modeling

Beginning in January, the Danville Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), staffed by the West Piedmont Planning District Commission (WPPDC), began work to update transportation analysis zones (TAZs) in the City of Danville and the urbanized portion of Pittsylvania County. These geographic zones function as the building blocks of transportation modeling, which forecasts likely travel patterns years, and sometimes decades, into the future, and are often used to determine whether existing transportation infrastructure will likely be adequate in years to come. Modeling analyses are also employed to determine the probable impact of various developments on the transportation system; one example of this in the Danville MPO is the future development of the Berry Hill Industrial Park. Additionally, this TAZ update is an important component of traffic modeling for the upcoming Danville MPO Constrained Long-Range Transportation Plan update. TAZs are comprised of census blocks and their geographic bounds typically consist of a few city blocks in the heart of an urban area, such as downtown Danville, but cover much larger areas in more sparsely developed locations such as those in Pittsylvania County. The last time the MPO updated TAZs was in 2014.

The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) asked the Danville MPO to perform a number of tasks with regard to the TAZ update, which involved population, employment, and vehicle data. For the population component of this update, for example, the MPO was required to update the 2016 population and project the population of each of the MPO’s 166 TAZs to the year 2045 to conform to the University of Virginia’s Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service locality projection for that year. Other components of the population requiring updates for 2016 and 2045 included housing units, households, group quarters, and group quarters population. Like population, employment figures in the MPO required an update for the year 2016, as well as a forecast to the year 2045. Likewise, the number of vehicles required updating for the year 2016 and were also projected to 2045.

With regard to changes in population in the Danville MPO, population growth has been concentrated in Danville’s River District for the past several years, and this trend is anticipated to continue in the foreseeable future, with some population growth spilling over into the Old West End. Substantial redevelopment is likely to also occur at the former Schoolfield industrial site along West Main Street. Employment growth has occurred in Danville’s River District recently, particularly with the repurposing of the former Dan River Research Building as medical offices and restaurant spaces as well as a variety of other commercial boutique-type development. Some employment growth is taking place at Cane Creek Centre in Pittsylvania County, located just east of Danville. The Berry Hill Industrial Park, currently under development and located in the southwestern portion of the MPO in Pittsylvania County, is anticipated to become a major employment center in coming years and is expected to generate thousands of jobs, as it consists of about 3,500 acres.

Danville MPO/Dewberry Near Completion of Connector Road Study

In 2017, the Danville Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), staffed by the West Piedmont Planning District Commission, employed the services of Dewberry consultants to determine the feasibility of constructing a connector road from the vicinity of the Berry Hill Industrial Park to the Oak Ridge Farms Road interchange at the Danville Expressway, as a means to effectively facilitate traffic movement between the industrial park and the expressway. This study updates a previous 2009 study which considered the development of a connector road. A draft of the study is nearly complete, and its final version will likely follow shortly thereafter. The study, once complete, is expected to be used as the basis for a Smart Scale application to apply for funding for the connector road, if deemed feasible based on cost and other factors.

In a late January meeting of the MPO Project Team, Dewberry associates discussed preliminary findings of their analyses of the study area. With regard to crash data MPO staff compiled, Dewberry noted that no discernible crash patterns were evident, though numerous angle crashes had occurred at U.S. Route 58 Business and its intersections with Berry Hill Road and Vandola Road. Also noted were the results of an initial environmental assessment, which generally indicated little impact on wildlife, though further analysis may be needed. Dewberry noted that traffic growth without consideration of the Berry Hill Industrial Park was estimated to be about 1 percent, and the level of service—which refers to how efficiently the roadway network functions—did not change markedly from the original study. Dewberry proposed three alternative alignments during the meeting, and discussion took place with regard to the shortest alignment, as it would likely be most cost-effective to construct.

As part of the study, a public input process will take place to acquire feedback about any proposed alignments from the general public as well as from property owners in the area. Another subsequent process is the required National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, which will analyze the likely environmental impacts on the area by the project and will more effectively determine which alignment alternative would be best to pursue for development.
2018 CEDS Update Complete

The West Piedmont Planning District Commission (WPPDC) completed the annual update of its regional economic development blueprint, the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). This document presents an inventory of educational, recreational, transportation, utility, and other assets, and articulates socio-economic trends taking place in the region. The 30-day public review process began in February and concluded on March 22.

Several chapters comprise the CEDS. The first chapter outlines district-wide goals as well as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats at the regional level. Chapter 2 summarizes recent demographic trends in the region and highlights its infrastructure and assets including health care, education, utilities, housing, and region-wide services. The third chapter conveys information pertaining to the state of the region’s economy and provides an overview of economic development activities such as business announcements. Following this, the CEDS contains a list of priority projects each locality would like to pursue, and this section could be considered the heart of the document.

A new addition to the CEDS this year includes a chapter detailing the implementation plan. Additionally, GOVirginia information regarding recent awards for regions 2 and 3 is discussed. GOVirginia is a relatively new statewide program which awards grants to support regional-level initiatives. The transportation section of the CEDS has been updated to include recent initiatives in the region. For example, the Danville MPO has embarked on a Connector Road Study, in concert with Dewberry consultants, to evaluate the feasibility of constructing a connector road between the Berry Hill Industrial Park and Danville Expressway. The City of Martinsville is in the process of determining how best to bridge the gap between that portion of Fayette Street west of Memorial Boulevard (U.S. Route 220 Business) and the eastern portion, as that intersection is a barrier to pedestrians and bicyclists; the initiative will more seamlessly link both neighborhoods of Fayette Street and connect uptown Martinsville when brought to fruition. The transportation section also now includes recommendations for Critical Freight Corridor Designation in VDOT’s Salem District.

Appalachian Regional Commission Assists Economies of Multiples states, Including Virginia

Many areas of Appalachia—including counties and cities in Virginia—are economically distressed or at risk of becoming economically distressed. The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) serves as a major provider of support to these communities, assisting them in becoming economically prosperous. The ARC is a combined state-federal organization which provides its services to 13 states (including Virginia) and 420 counties located therein. The ARC has identified five goals for which it provides support, and they include workforce preparation, the generation of economic opportunities, helping localities to take advantage of their cultural and natural assets, developing crucial infrastructure, and propagating community capacity and leadership. In the West Piedmont Planning District, the counties of Patrick and Henry, and the City of Martinsville are communities eligible for ARC assistance.

The economy of Appalachia lags in many respects to the U.S. economy. For example, based on 2011—2015 American Community Survey (ACS) data, per capita income in this region is just $24,302—16 percent lower than the per capita income at the national level. The share of individuals living below the poverty level in the U.S. is 15.5 percent, however, it is 17.1 percent in Appalachia. Additionally, a greater share of children in Appalachia live below the poverty level compared to their national counterparts, and more adults age 65 and over live in poverty in this region than their peers nationally.

The ARC, in concert with the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), in Fiscal Year 2017 provided more than $11 million, which was matched by over $11 million in additional dollars, in furtherance of 42 projects in the Commonwealth of Virginia; these funds will generate $35 million in private dollars. These funds can be crucial in improving the economic situation in Virginia. One example locally is a $500,000 grant provided by ARC to Henry County to assist the county with refurbishing the former historic Bassett Train Depot. Another example is a tentative $75,000 planning grant provided to the City of Martinsville to conduct a feasibility and market analysis for a potential “Healthy Hub” in the city. More information is available at www.arc.gov.

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