Berry Hill Connector Road Recommended for Funding

On January 15th, draft Smart Scale scores were released, and the Berry Hill Connector Road application was recommended for $31 million in funding. The application was submitted in August by the Danville Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), which is staffed by the West Piedmont Planning District Commission (WPPDC). In terms of overall scores, this application ranked 3rd out of 28 applications in the VDOT Lynchburg District and 52nd out of 433 statewide project applications. Additionally, because of the vast amount of development potential at the Southern Virginia Mega Site at Berry Hill, this application received the highest economic development score in the state, by a very significant margin. This funding recommendation has not been finalized and remains a draft proposal; final project scores and selections will be announced in June, after which the selected projects will be entered into the state’s Six-Year Improvement Program and funded. Until that time, public comment will be solicited via a series of Commonwealth Transportation Board public input meetings to be held across the state.

On behalf of the Danville-Pittsylvania MPO Policy Board, David Hoback, WPPDC Executive Director/MPO Administrator commented that the organization was ecstatic to learn the project was initially recommended for funding and moreover was able to make this contribution to the infrastructure development of the Southern Virginia Mega Site at Berry Hill. Mr. Hoback stated “The tentatively successful Smart Scale application was a marvelous example of a team effort involving multiple contributors from both local and state levels and would not have happened without these efforts. Although many stakeholders significantly contributed to the effort, Mr. Hoback noted the vital guidance and support of the VDOT, Lynchburg District planning staff, Pittsylvania County Assistant Administrator Greg Sides who was instrumental in securing Virginia Tobacco Commission funds for the required NEPA process, and WPPDC/MPO Regional Planner Joe Bonanno who did an exceptional job in preparing the Smart Scale application.”

The connector road will provide a direct route from the Danville Expressway to Berry Hill Road, in the vicinity of the industrial park, enabling vehicles such as trucks accessing the industrial park to avoid local roads and minimize their travel time. The Southern Virginia Mega Site at Berry Hill is one of the largest industrial sites on the East Coast, consisting of approximately 3,500 acres. The industrial park comprises 12 individual development sites, one of which (Lot 4) has been graded, priming the industrial park for investment and development. At full build-out, the facility is anticipated to accommodate 11,500 jobs. If the funding recommendation for this project becomes finalized later this spring, the Berry Hill Industrial Park will become much more marketable to business prospects considering the site for a facility.

The connector road is proposed to be approximately two miles in length, 12 feet in lane width along with eight-foot paved shoulders, which can be utilized for bicycling, given proximity of the planned Beaches to Bluegrass Trail. To further promote multimodalism, funds will be provided for a bus shelter to enable Danville Transit to serve the Berry Hill Industrial Park. The roadway will traverse primarily agricultural and wooded lands, and this alignment—one of several options put forth—will have the least impact on private properties and environmental features.

The total cost of the connector road was estimated at about $33.5 million, but the remaining $2.5 million was planned to be acquired from local and state sources. Smart Scale is a relatively recent funding mechanism developed by the Commonwealth of Virginia which scores project applications based on how the projects would impact several factors including safety, economic development, accessibility, the environment, congestion, and land use (in urbanized areas consisting of over 200,000 people).
In 2018, the West Piedmont Planning District Commission (WPPDC) began to coordinate the RIDE Solutions program throughout the West Piedmont Region. Recently, WPPDC staff began to aggressively promote the program. In 2019, RIDE Solutions ads will appear in two local annual magazines primarily targeted to businesses throughout the region. These include Discover MHC magazine, which is associated with the Martinsville-Henry County Chamber of Commerce, and Our Town, which provides information to the Danville/Pittsylvania County business community.

More recently, staff began promoting the RIDE Solutions program at business-related events in the Martinsville/Henry County area. On March 5th and 6th, program coordinators had a table and promotional materials available at the Fast Track 2019 trade show, held at the former Sears store at the Village of Martinsville shopping center. There, staff promoted the program to a variety of area business, large and small, as well as to the general public.

On March 12th, staff once again was present at the Job & Resource Fair, held at New College Institute, to promote the program. This event was geared toward matching job seekers with area employers. Staff once again provided promotional materials to attendees.

At both events, RIDE Solutions representatives networked with numerous area businesses and corporations. In doing so, it was learned that many of these employers—including staffing agencies—were having issues with regard to their employees being able to get to work. RIDE Solutions was able to ultimately make excellent contacts with human resources staff and other company representatives for follow-up activities. Among the general public, numerous attendees who expressed interest in the program indicated that they did not have issues with transportation, but they knew others who did. RIDE Solutions will also be present at The Patrick County Showcase, a job fair and expo, to be held at Rotary Field in Stuart on April 11th.

If you represent a business whose employees have difficulty getting to work due to lack of reliable transportation, or if you have difficulty filling open positions because of mobility issues, RIDE Solutions could be your solution. Conversely, if you are an employee without reliable transportation to work or you would like to access employment but have not been able to do so due to lack of reliable transportation, we may also be able to assist you! We are an excellent regional resource providing ride-matching services to those who wish to carpool, and we promote vanpooling, transit, bicycling and walking (where feasible), and telecommuting. Joe Bonanno is the regional coordinator of RIDE Solutions for the West Piedmont Region, and can be reached at jbonanno@wppdc.org or at (276) 638-3987. Additionally, you can learn more about the RIDE Solutions program by visiting our completely redesigned website, www.ridesolutions.org.
Multiple Transportation Projects in Region Recommended for Smart Scale Funding

As the lead article in this newsletter details, the Berry Hill Connector Road was recommended to be funded via the Smart Scale program. That article also notes that Smart Scale is a recent funding mechanism developed by the Commonwealth of Virginia which scores project applications based on how the projects would likely impact numerous factors including safety, economic development, congestion, accessibility, the environment, and land use (in urban areas over 200,000 population). Smart Scale replaces a more arbitrary system for project selection which relied less on data than does the data-driven Smart Scale. In addition to the Berry Hill Connector Road, numerous other projects were recommended for funding in the West Piedmont Planning District. The final funding decisions will be made by the Commonwealth Transportation Board in June, after which the final projects will be entered into the state’s Six-Year Improvement Program and funded. Other projects in the region which were recommended for funding include:

- **Improvements to U.S. Route 220 and Pleasant Hill Road/Sontag Road (Route 619) in Franklin County:** Construction of a Restricted Crossing U-Turn (RCUT) (innovative) design at U.S. Route 220 and Pleasant Hill Road, which would include median separation and the requirement that drivers wishing to turn left onto U.S. Route 220 first turn right and then loop around at a new U-turn facility. A southbound left-turn lane would be included in this design. A separate R-CUT configuration would also be constructed at the intersection of U.S. Route 220 and Sontag Road. In contrast to a traditional intersection, an R-CUT does not permit traffic to directly turn left from an intersecting road onto a major road. Rather, the traffic would turn right and perform a u-turn at a designated location to the right of the intersection. This configuration promotes safety, as it prevents left turns at the intersection, thereby eliminating the need for left turning vehicles to cross two-directional traffic. Requiring vehicles to turn right and then left also promotes roadway efficiency, saving drivers time. A total of $5,928,000 in Smart Scale funding was requested for this project.

- **Improvements to U.S. Route 220 and Grassy Hill Road (Route 919) in Franklin County:** This project would involve the construction of a non-signalized Continuous Green-T at the intersection. Included would be an extension of the existing acceleration lane on U.S. Route 220 North, a conversion of a driveway along U.S. Route 220 North to right-turn only, and a right-turn lane at this driveway. A Continuous Green-T is an intersection configuration in which traffic turning from an intersecting road to a major road turns right as in a traditional intersection; however, left-turning traffic, when crossing the median of a major roadway, enters the traffic stream via a form of an acceleration lane to enhance safety. A total of $6,958,000 in Smart Scale funding was requested for this project.

- **Improvements to Booker T. Washington Highway (Route 122) and Lost Mountain Road (Route 636) in Franklin County:** This project would include the addition of right- and left-turn lanes with median separation at this intersection as well as at the intersection of Route 122 and the Booker T. Washington National Monument, the addition of a multi-use path along Route 122, and access management improvements in this area. A total of $9,759,000 in Smart Scale funding was requested for this project.

- **U.S. Route 29 and Shula Drive (Route 642) in Pittsylvania County:** This project, located in northern Pittsylvania County, south of Hurt, would relocate the western portion of the intersection of Shula Drive further south along U.S. Route 29, while leaving the eastern intersection in its current location. This intersection has experienced a number of serious crashes involving vehicles crossing U.S. Route 29, and it is anticipated that relocating part of this intersection southward will dramatically increase safety at this location. A total of $4,768,466 in Smart Scale funding was requested for this project.

The two diagrams below represent RCUT and Continuous Green-T innovative intersections and how drivers would navigate them. As shown, a main feature of an RCUT is the prohibition of left turns at the intersection, while the Continuous Green-T allows typical right turns, but left-turning vehicles must merge into the travel lanes to enhance safety.
2019 CEDS Nears Completion Amidst Economic Development Announcements

In late February, the draft Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) documents were distributed throughout the region as part of the 30-day public review period prior to the document’s adoption by the West Piedmont Planning District Commission (WPPDC), which takes place on March 28th. The creation of an annual CEDS report is a requirement of the West Piedmont Planning District, as a designated Economic Development District, of the U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration (EDA). New to the CEDS this year is a supplemental document which highlights main elements of the report including the regional vision, a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis, an industry cluster analysis, goals and strategies, a socio-economic snapshot of the region, and the regional “report card” which provides various performance indicators. Upon adoption of the CEDS by the WPPDC, the document will be forwarded to the EDA’s office in Philadelphia.

A logical progression from the discussion of the CEDS update is a summary of recent economic development announcements in the West Piedmont Planning District. In recent months, the following announcements have taken place:

- In December, McAirlaid’s, a manufacturer of absorbent pads which operates a facility in Franklin County, announced a $7.8 million investment in that facility which will include the addition of 25 jobs as well as new equipment to promote packaging of fruit and protein products.

- In May, Stik-Pak, a provider of contract packaging, announced it will relocate its current facility, housed at the Franklin County Commerce Center and employing 35, to the new Summit View Business Park located in the Wirtz area of Franklin County. There, the company will create up to an additional 60 high-paying positions as part of a $14.3 million investment. This follows on the heels of the announcement of Summit View’s first tenant, Valley Star Credit Union, which will relocate its Rocky Mount facility to the business park as part of a $5.25 million investment that will create ten additional high-paying positions bringing total employment to 32.

- In March 2018, Panaceutics announced it will set up a high tech manufacturing operation in the Ringgold East Industrial Park, which will also incorporate research and development. Panaceutics specializes in infusing pharmaceuticals and nutraceuticals into foods to revolutionize how medication is consumed. As part of the $5.8 million investment, the company plans to create 70 jobs.

- In December, the PRA Group, which serves to collect non-performing loans, announced that, as part of a $15.1 million investment, it will establish a call center in Danville, where it will employ approximately 500 people.

The Launch Place Awarded Regional Innovation Strategies Grant

In March, it was announced that The Launch Place was awarded a $300,000 grant as part of the 2018 Regional Innovation Strategies award, a program of the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA). The award fund provides seed funding to the organization over a three-year period, and will support the creation of a portfolio manager position with the organization. The individual who fills this position will perform functions such as assessing startup firms for possible investment, managing 17 portfolio companies associated with The Launch Place, market the organization’s investment funds, and take part in training pertaining to the management of funds. The Launch Place is responsible for providing consulting services to businesses as well as retaining and recruiting entrepreneurs throughout the Dan River Region. The Launch Place was one of 230 entities across the U.S. that applied for this competitive grant and it, along with 39 other entrepreneurship-focused entities throughout 28 states, were awarded funding.

Interested in receiving this flyer by e-mail? Contact us at the following:

West Piedmont Planning District Commission
P.O. Box 5268
1100 Madison Street
Martinsville, VA 24115

Phone: 276 638-3987
Fax: 276 638-8137
E-mail: Staff@wppdc.org
Website: www.wppdc.org