Danville MPO/WPPDC Wraps Up Transportation Studies in Danville

In May, EPR Planning Consultants, retained on behalf of the Danville Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO)/WPPDC, completed two studies in the City of Danville. One study involved the analysis of Mount Cross Road from its intersection with Piedmont Drive north to Dimon Drive/Averett University’s North Campus to evaluate projected traffic conditions to 2040 based on the campus’ anticipated growth, and to explore appropriate solutions. The analysis found that while this corridor currently operates within generally acceptable volume limits, by 2040 the traffic accessing special events at Averett on Saturdays is anticipated to result in unacceptable traffic delays at the intersection of Mount Cross Road and Dimon Drive in certain directions. Furthermore, traffic volumes along other intersections on this corridor are anticipated to degrade to borderline deficient conditions. Recommendations in the final report include the following:

- The construction of a roundabout at the intersection of Mount Cross Road and Dimon Drive, which would keep traffic moving while improving safety, and serve as a gateway to Averett University.
- At the intersection of Mount Cross Road and Lowes Drive, EPR recommends converting the existing eastbound and westbound through-left and dedicated right-turn lanes to dedicated left-turn and through-right lanes at both intersections to address projected traffic delays in 2040.
- Extend transit service, or add new service, to Dimon Drive and/or the Averett University’s North Campus.
- Add a multi-use trail connection from a proposed Dan Riverwalk Trail extension along the Sandy River to Averett University’s North Campus.

The second study completed by EPR Consultants was Danville’s River District Bicycle and Pedestrian Study, which made recommendations to improve bicycle and pedestrian safety and connectivity in the River District. The MPO recognizes that multi-modal transportation infrastructure, particularly in urban centers, provides for an appealing environment for residents and visitors to engage in safe active recreation and often serves as a development catalyst. Some major recommendations put forth in the study include the following:

- Road diets on Poplar Street, Ridge Street, and Memorial Drive. Road diets involve eliminating some travel lanes, adding center turn lanes or landscaped medians with intermittent turn lanes, and adding bi-directional bicycle lanes.
- Designating bicycle lanes on Wilson Street and a portion of Main Street.
- Painting sharrow arrows on Jefferson Avenue, Loyal Street, Monument Street, Craghead Street, a portion of Industrial Avenue, and a section of Newton Street to alert drivers that bicyclists share the road.
- At the intersection of Main Street and Riverside Drive, it is recommended to reduce lane widths on Riverside Drive to 11’ to enable pedestrian refuges to be constructed in the center of crosswalks, as well as to install pedestrian signals that count down, as means to promote pedestrian safety at that intersection.
- At the intersection of Memorial Drive and Main Street, it is recommended that one through lane on eastbound Memorial Drive be closed to traffic and converted to a pedestrian refuge to increase pedestrian safety.
- Other recommendations in the plan include the addition of bicycle racks and maintenance stations, crosswalk enhancements, and better lighting to improve safety and security.
West Piedmont Planning District Sponsors Regional Workforce/Health Conversation

Introduction:

On April 10, 2017 the West Piedmont Planning District Commission (WPPDC) through a Building Collaborative Communities (BCC) grant from the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) organized and sponsored a Workforce and Health Regional Conversation at the Virginia Museum of Natural History in Martinsville, Virginia. The purpose of the event was to engage regional stakeholders from K-12 education, higher education, workforce development, private sector employers, local government, and economic development to consider broad challenges and issues related to workforce development and specifically the impact of the opioid crisis as it affects the capacity of employers to find and retain productive and competent employees. There were 34 participants at the event featuring informational presentations, a moderated panel discussion, and a facilitated group conversation among the participants. Holly Lesko, a consultant from Blacksburg, VA, served as the panel moderator and group discussion facilitator.

Background:

The genesis of the meeting developed from the West Piedmont Regional Summit held in October 2016 at New College Institute in Martinsville. This BCC grant-sponsored activity was a daylong event at which over ninety (90) stakeholders from across the West Piedmont Region gathered for an event featuring informational presentations and facilitated group discussions in the areas of economic development, education/workforce, technology, and sustainable health initiatives. As a result of this event, stakeholder groups from the areas of education/workforce development and health expressed an interest in meeting again to further discuss and explore opportunities for future regional collaboration.

Informational Presentations:

From workforce to opioids, experts provided information about the make-up, opportunities, resources, and challenges of the region’s workforce and the impacts on economic and community development these issues have. Presenters included Rhonda Hodges, Vice-President, Workforce, Community and Economic Development, Patrick-Henry Community College; Dr. Julie Brown, Director of Advanced Learning, Institute for Advanced Learning and Research; Lisa Fultz, Director, West Piedmont Workforce Investment Board; and Beth O’Connor, Director, Virginia Rural Health Association. PowerPoints from their presentations are available at wppdc.org.

Panel Discussions:

Seven community leaders including Dr. Jared Cotton, Henry County School Superintendent; Mike Burnette, Franklin County Economic Development Director; Lisa Fultz, Director, West Piedmont Workforce Investment Board; Dr. Jody Hershey, Director, West Piedmont Health District; Josh Elliott, HP Department, Eastman Chemical Company; Dr. Angeline Godwin, President, Patrick-Henry Community College; and Linda Green, Director, Southern Virginia Regional Alliance, served on the panel to respond to questions, ideas, and concerns regarding the workforce needs and assets in the region.

Questions ranged from general to specific and included the following:

- Share what you believe are the top 3 required hard and soft skills and/or supports necessary for a productive ready to hire workforce for local industries and businesses in this region. And if you wish, what do you see as the barriers to these?
- What do you believe are the barriers to career readiness through participation in educational programming in this region? What could help?
- How can school divisions and local employers work together to provide valuable learning opportunities and educational participation in available programming and internships for potential employees?
- What priority activities/programs should GO Virginia consider for funding and support in this region?
West Piedmont Planning District Sponsors Regional Workforce/Health Conversation, Continued

Group Discussion

Following the panel segment of the program, participants moved to brainstorming around key issues that emerged from the panel questions and discussions: Health of the Workforce; Soft Skills (changed to Foundational/Essential Skills); Career Pathways/Pipelines; Partnerships for Engaging Industry. The following issues were considered:

- Identify key drivers/needs/underlying factors of this issue in the region
- Group and fill in elements that were missing from individual brainstorming effort
- Ideas for NEXT STEPS in addressing specific issues/barriers
- Identify a hierarchy or order for taking these steps (initiating a timeline)
- Contributions from the larger group to these concepts through presentation of their issues and process and additions from the rest of the participants
- Opportunity to specifically support next steps by adding individual names to elements that most link to participant interests and skill sets

Themes emerged from the brainstorming session which were then ranked in order of importance for keeping this work on track:

- Shifting Workforce Culture – generational shifts
- Involving younger people at the beginning – engage them in development of workforce goals
- Asset Mapping – Services and Resources
- Involvement of law enforcement – all levels of work needs this voice
- Incentive participation in training and programming – more carrot, less stick
- Pipelines and Industry Partnerships focus
- Quality of Life – for everyone, we all win when workforce supported
- GO Virginia! links
- Certifications

The group concluded with discussions about how the WPPDC will drive specific elements of this work and who else needs to be involved to champion others. The PDC was seen as the driver behind asset mapping and convening. The Workforce Development Board was identified to support convening as well.

Conclusion:

Using the above themes and commonly identified issues that emerged from the event, the West Piedmont Planning District Commission has identified an opportunity to convene future regional workforce meetings to continue this conversation. Stakeholders will be engaged in developing collaborative approaches to advance workforce dialogue leading to future potential actions and strategies designed to advance future workforce development success in the West Piedmont Region. The PDC will work in partnership with the West Piedmont Workforce Investment Board in convening stakeholders for future meetings and potential initiatives.
Many WPPD Localities Certified as Work Ready

In August 2012, the Dan River Region Collaborative, comprising the cities and counties of the West Piedmont Planning District with the exception of Franklin County, in addition to Halifax County, was selected by the National ACT Certified Work Ready Communities Academy to serve as a regional pilot in the Commonwealth of Virginia to work toward achieving regional Work Ready status. Through this program, individuals take an exam which evaluates skills in applied mathematics, reading for information, locating information, and soft skills to establish readiness for jobs based on several readiness categories comprising bronze, silver, gold, and platinum certifications. The bronze certification level—the lowest category of certification—ensures that an individual can perform 16 percent of jobs, whereas the platinum level—the highest—ensures that an individual can perform 99 percent of jobs. When the required number of individuals in each locality passes the exam, thereby achieving “work ready” status, that particular locality achieves ACT Work Ready Status, indicating that a certain percentage of the population possesses certain skills demanded by employers.

The ACT Certified Work Ready Communities program for the Dan River Region Collaborative was originally scheduled to end in 2015, however the initiative has been extended until December 2017. At the present time, Henry, Pittsylvania, and Halifax counties, as well as the City of Martinsville, have attained their goals and are now certified work ready communities. Most recently, Martinsville became the fourth locality to attain certification in the region. Currently, the City of Danville is very close to achieving certification, with 97 percent of its goals attained, and Patrick County’s goal attainment is 87 percent. If those two communities attain 100 percent of their goals, the region will be certified as Work Ready.

Each locality that achieves Work Ready certification must continue to maintain that status. The ACT Work Ready Communities Academy requires these localities to continue to add to their roster of individuals who become certified as well as to have their employers continue to pledge support for the program. One of three additional goals must also be attained by each of these localities. These goals include individual achievers attaining higher certification levels, for example, advancing from bronze to silver; employers completing employment profiles; or the National Career Readiness Certificate being approved by colleges for credit as a part of stackable certifications.

The National Career Readiness Certificate is an indispensable economic development tool for the region because it certifies that a certain percentage of the population can perform jobs demanded by employers. It further certifies workers’ productivity, dependability, ability to work in teams, and management potential.

WPPDC Begins Updating Regional Bicycle Plan

Earlier this spring, West Piedmont Planning District Commission staff began to update the West Piedmont Regional Bicycle Plan, which was adopted in 2005. The existing Plan was adopted with locality and public input, which included that from the bicycling community. Planned bicycle routes in the current Plan mainly include roadways throughout each locality, since multi-use trails, while present in some areas of the region, are limited throughout the planning district. This next iteration of the Plan will likely mirror the existing Plan to a large extent with regard to the formation process as well as the recommended routes, though there will be changes.

WPPDC staff has met with planners and other staff members representing the region’s localities to obtain input for the updated Plan. Staff has also compiled figures for many of the roadways throughout the region, in the form of traffic volume, speed limits, heavy vehicle (truck) traffic, and grade. Another analytical tool at the WPPDC’s disposal, not available until recent years, is Strava. This is a mobile application bicyclists can download which anonymously records where they ride, and which generates “heat maps” within cities, towns, and counties, thereby illustrating the most heavily-traveled bicycle routes, based on use. WPPDC staff is now in the process of forming a technical committee to guide the Plan’s update process. The WPPDC will utilize its public participation process to garner public input as well.

This updated Plan, once complete, can address multiple issues faced by the region. The region’s population, which suffers from a disproportionate share of chronic health conditions, can benefit via bicycling opportunities along routes that provide prospects for easygoing riding in scenic settings. Additionally, the Plan can serve as an economic development document to promote bicycle tourism in the region. Last but not least, the document will provide residents with a roadmap for cycling-specific recreational activities. The updated Plan should be completed in the coming months.
2017 Robert Wood Johnson County Health Rankings Released

Health Rankings for Communities of the West Piedmont Planning District and Virginia, 2013 and 2017

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Source: Robert Wood Johnson County Health Rankings & Roadmaps

Robert Wood Johnson County Health Rankings & Roadmaps data has been released for 2017, and the above table illustrates key health indicators for localities within the West Piedmont Planning District and the State of Virginia for 2013 and 2017, for the sake of comparison. The table shows that the share of the population of each locality which smokes has declined over this time period, indicating a trend away from smoking; data were not available for this metric in 2013 for the City of Martinsville, so no comparison can be made for that city. The rates of adult obesity have mostly increased over the five-year period for the localities in the region, and the rates of physical inactivity have exhibited mixed results. This indicates that diet and exercise continue to be issues that need to be addressed in our region. The teen birth rate has declined in all localities in the region as well as in Virginia, indicating that this is not only a regional trend, but also a state and possibly a national trend.

Compared to the State of Virginia, the ratio of the population of each locality to primary care physicians is an aspect of community health that must be addressed, as the ratios of populations to these physicians is relatively high compared to the State. Henry County appears to have made significant progress with regard to reducing the ratio of its population to primary care physicians. The ratio of population to primary care physicians is important because these health professionals are often the first line of defense against chronic health conditions. The ratio of population to mental health professionals has also been high in the region compared to the State, though Franklin and Patrick counties, as well as the cities of Danville and Martinsville have made significant progress in reducing these ratios. The availability of mental health professionals is very important because conditions such as anxiety, depression, and addiction impact the quality of life and overall health of many in the region as well as throughout the U.S. The shares of children in poverty in the region has exhibited a slight decline in most localities, and the shares of single-parent households have exhibited mixed trends.

CTB Finalizes FY 18 Six Year Improvement Program to Include Regional Smart Scale Projects

On Tuesday, June 20th, the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) finalized the Fiscal Year (FY) 2018 Six-Year Improvement Program (SYIP), which allocates funding for multiple projects applied for via the Smart Scale process. A Smart Scale application submitted by the Danville Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), which is staffed by the West Piedmont Planning District Commission (WPPDC), will be funded. This project involves the installation of a right-turn lane on westbound Mount Cross Road (Route 750/844) at its intersection with Whitmell School Road (Route 750), and the implementation of access management strategies along the west side of the intersection, at a cost of $1.08 million. The WPPDC provided technical assistance to Henry County, for two of its funded Smart Scale applications included in this year’s SYIP, and to Franklin County for both of its applications which were included in this year’s SYIP.

In Henry County, one of these two projects is a crosswalk along Virginia Avenue (U.S. 220 Business) at Wheeler Avenue in Collinsville, which will also include a sidewalk at a cost of $639,915, to improve pedestrian safety. The second of these projects in Henry County, located at the intersection of Dillons Fork Road (Route 609) and The Great Road (Route 683), will involve grading of terrain to improve sight distance as well as the replacement of static flashers with actuated flashers to alert drivers of traffic approaching the intersection. This project will cost about $430,877.

In Franklin County, the FY 18 SYIP includes funding for a partial access road, multi-use trail, and park-and-ride lot for the planned 550-acre Southway Business Park, at a cost of about $22 million, of which $3.75 million will consist of Smart Scale funds. Also in Franklin County, an intersection improvement project at Brooks Mill Road (Route 834) and Burnt Chimney Road (Route 670) has been included in the FY 18 SYIP, which involves funding for an intersection realignment to include a roundabout as well as access management at an adjacent business to improve safety, at a cost of $3.9 million. Other projects in the region which will be funded vis-à-vis addition in the FY 18 SYIP include bicycle and pedestrian improvements on Arnett Boulevard in Danville, at a cost of about $500,588, and the realignment of Main Street (U.S. 220 Business) and Pell Avenue/Franklin Street (Route 40) in the Town of Rocky Mount, at a cost of about $4.9 million.
**City of Martinsville Seeks to Redevelop Former Paradise Inn as “Healthy Hub”**

The City of Martinsville has its sights set on revitalizing Fayette Street, and the potential centerpiece of that is the former Paradise Inn, located at the intersection of Fayette and Beaver streets, west of Memorial Boulevard. The Paradise Inn, built in the 1940s, was host to many establishments serving the largely African-American community of West Fayette Street, and included a roller-skating rink, a club, a restaurant, apartments, and a hair salon. However, the 6,200 square-foot structure is now vacant and in a state of disrepair. The City intends to redevelop the building for multiple purposes— all centered around accessibility to local foods and promoting health lifestyles.

The City is a recipient of technical assistance provided through the Local Foods, Local Places initiative, a national program designed to assist communities with capitalizing on the growing demand for local foods, improving wellness and healthy food access, boosting economic opportunities for local farmers and businesses, and fostering entrepreneurship. Other components of the program include revitalization of downtowns and neighborhoods by supporting food hubs, community gardens and kitchens, and other food enterprises, as well as providing choices for access to those amenities (walking, biking, transit). Sponsors of the program include the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the U.S. Department of Transportation, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Appalachian Regional Commission. In conjunction with Renaissance Planning, the federal partners are assisting the City in efforts to reinvigorate and promote health in the West Fayette Street area. The Martinsville Henry County Coalition for Health and Wellness along with Go Healthy West Piedmont are also partnering with Martinsville to make the Healthy Hub a reality. Martinsville and collaborative partners are committed to linking the local food system efforts to community livability and economic diversification.

The vision for Phase I of the Paradise Inn is to serve as a “Healthy Hub” for the community, encompassing a first-floor restaurant serving healthy foods—including locally-sourced products—to area residents. Space upstairs would be utilized to promote healthy lifestyles to the community as well as a venue for meetings. As an entrepreneurial component, a kitchen which would be certified by the USDA is planned for the basement to train residents in food preparation to promote the development of local food establishments in the community. The creation of a “Healthy Hub” for the preparation of healthy foods is a paramount concern for the Fayette Street community because the area is considered a food desert, which is defined as a community without access to healthy food options due to lack of grocery stores or fresh food markets.

The former Paradise Inn is currently in private hands and would need to be acquired by the City; however, the City owns land across Beaver Street from the building, on which expansion activities could take place. Phase II would involve constructing several new buildings on this adjacent site. Other elements of the second phase would include the development of a hydroponics facility and community garden—both of which would be used to produce food on-site. The two sites could be functionally merged into one vis-à-vis the closure of Beaver Street adjacent to the building, which could enable the former street space to be used as a patio.

Another major element of the project would be connectivity and multi-modal transportation enhancements along the West Fayette Street corridor, with an emphasis on pedestrian and bicycle safety enhancements at the intersection of Fayette, Memorial, and Church streets. Due to the large size and geometry of this intersection, traversing it by either walking or bicycling is generally perceived as unsafe by area residents; therefore it is a barrier between West Fayette Street and the rest of the city, including uptown, to the east.

Prior to the former Paradise Inn becoming established as a “Healthy Hub,” a feasibility study to determine whether the concept is practical, as well as a preliminary architectural report to determine if revitalization of the structure is feasible, must both take place. This community effort is timely because a recent study by Feeding America revealed that out of nine cities and 26 counties in the area, Martinsville is the highest food-insecure area, meaning that the City lacks regular access to an adequate supply of food to provide for an active, healthy life.

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

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1100 Madison Street  
Martinsville, VA 24115  
Phone: 276 638-3987  
Fax: 276 638-8137  
E-mail: Staff@wppdc.org  
Website: www.wppdc.org  

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