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Re: Responses to Public Information Open House Comments for North Avenue Corridor
Improvements PI#: 0019833, Clarke

Thank you for your feedback concerning the proposed project referenced above. The website and the Public Information Open House (PIOH) held on October 22, 2024, presented an alternative that proposed a reallocation of the existing five-lane configuration to a four-lane configuration to construct continuous bicycle and pedestrian facilities with minimal need for additional right-of-way (ROW). Feedback was received to this Open House Alternative and a response to the comments is provided herein. We appreciate your participation and the questions and comments received through the project's website and the in-person PIOH.

Every comment formally provided during the project's comment period beginning on October 22, 2024, and ending on November 1, 2024, will be made part of the project's official record. Formal comments were received in the following ways: audio recording and transcription at the in-person PIOH, comment forms provided at the in-person PIOH, through the project website, or via mail to the address provided on the comment form. The project's website received **195** visits during the comment period, and **45** people attended the in-person PIOH.

Of the **67** respondents who formally commented on the Open House Alternative, **42** were in **support** of the project, **7** were **opposed**, and **5** were **uncommitted**. **9** respondents expressed conditional support if the number of lanes were reduced, and **4** expressed conditional support if the number of lanes remains the same. At the open house, a number of individuals expressed their opposition to the Open House Alternative. Based on the formal comments received, however, very few individuals who were opposed to the Open House Alternative entered their opposition into the official record through a formal comment in one of the ways indicated above.

Following the PIOH, on November 6, 2024, the Athens Clarke County Unified Government (ACCGov) Commission met and reviewed a Commission Defined Option put forward by Commissioners Taylor and Thornton. The Commission Defined Option was voted by the Commission to advance for further study by the engineering design team. In summary, the Commission Defined Option proposes the following:

- 1. Implement 5-lane typical section for the corridor to include facilities for pedestrians and cyclists;*
- 2. For the SR 10 inner loop entry and exit ramps, prioritize partial stop/yield intersection control improvements in lieu of a roundabout or traffic light;*
- 3. Install an 8-foot decorative screen wall along the property line on the North Avenue*

side of Advantage and along the property line on the Bray Street side of Advantage down to the entrance drive of Advantage for the purposes of improving pedestrian safety;

- 4. As part of the implementation of the 5-lane typical section, the Manager shall direct staff to perform a roadway safety audit to evaluate the need for additional crosswalks and refuge islands; and*
- 5. Staff will report back no later than May 2025 its determinations related to the implementation of the modifications shown above.*

As the project develops and the Commission Defined Option is evaluated, the proposed project may need to be revised for feasibility. The project would then proceed to right-of-way (ROW) acquisition and final design. Following the completion of all ROW acquisitions, the project design would be finalized, and the project would advance to construction.

ACCGov has prepared a single response letter that addresses all questions and comments received during the comment period which are summarized below (in *italics*) followed by our response. Where relevant to the comment, the responses below make the distinction between the Open House Alternative and the Commission Defined Option.

- Comments were received in support of the Open House Alternative, if the community supports the alternative.*

Thank you for your comment.

- Comments were received both in support of, and in opposition to, safer bike and pedestrian facilities, including separate facilities for cyclists and pedestrians.*

Both the Open House Alternative and the Commission Defined Option include improvements to bike and pedestrian facilities along the project corridor. The design team is in the process of evaluating the corridor's potential for separate facilities for cyclists and pedestrians under the Commission Defined Option, based on several factors including ROW impacts. In addition, the project proposes reducing the speed limit on North Avenue from 40 miles per hour to 35 miles per hour and providing design features that reinforce this change. This reduction aims to enhance road safety for all users by promoting a reduction in vehicle stopping distances, increased control, and reduced impact speeds in the event of a crash. Reducing average vehicle speeds by 10 percent has been linked with a 32 percent reduction in fatal crashes, a 15 percent reduction in injury crashes, and a 10 percent reduction in all other crashes for all road users.

- Commenters expressed support for the road diet due to excessive speeding, little car traffic, and lack of safe pedestrian and cycling accommodations. Commenters would like to see the road diet project extend further north up Danielsville Road.*

The Open House Alternative presented a road diet that reduced the roadway from five-lanes (two travel lanes in each direction with a center turn lane) to four lanes (two

northbound travel lanes, a center turn lane, and one southbound travel lane). With the addition of wider pedestrian and cycling accommodations, road diets such as these have been shown to reduce speeding and improve safety. See the Federal Highway Administration's Road Diet Informational Guide for more information: <https://highways.dot.gov/safety/other/road-diets/road-diet-informational-guide>.

The Commission Defined Option is not a road diet, however, it proposes to include improved pedestrian and cycling accommodations to make the corridor safer for other modes of transportation.

There is currently no adjoining project to the north extending up Danielsville Road, but the interest in safety improvements north of the proposed project has been noted and will be considered as ACCGov updates its transportation improvement plan.

- *Comments were received in support of, and in opposition to, a three-lane option throughout the corridor.*

Although a three-lane configuration was evaluated as an alternative, the three-lane option is no longer under consideration as part of this project. The Open House Alternative included four-lanes and the Commission Defined Option includes 5-lanes. Under both alternatives, the design team is working to identify appropriate protections for pedestrians and cyclists from vehicles along the project corridor.

- *Comments were received noting opposition to the project as shown in the Open House Alternative and citing that North Avenue is fine the way it is. Comments noted negative perceptions of Prince Avenue and a desire to avoid similar changes on North Avenue.*

While both the Open House Alternative and the Commission Defined Option propose to address safety and operational issues along the North Avenue corridor, the Commission Defined Option proposes maintaining similar automobile traffic operations through the corridor compared with the existing conditions. This option would not alter the number of lanes along this section of North Avenue. The North Avenue project is dissimilar to the Price Avenue project because Prince Avenue was constrained to existing ROW, and therefore yielded different results.

- *Comments were received in support of improved pedestrian crossings, pedestrian islands, and access to bus stops.*

Both the Open House Alternative and the Commission Defined Option include improvements to pedestrian facilities along the project corridor. While the Open House Alternative proposed pedestrian signal upgrades at key intersections and consideration of mid-block crossings, the design team is in the process of evaluating the corridor's potential for separate facilities for pedestrians under the Commission Defined Option. Transit-stop upgrades, with improved crossing facilities where feasible, will be a part of the project under both the Open House Alternative and Commission Defined Option.

- *Comments noted both support for, and opposition to, constructing a roundabout along North Avenue.*

The Open House Alternative proposes modification of the SR 10 exit ramps, to be determined by future traffic studies. A roundabout is one of the options under consideration for that alternative. The Commission Defined Option proposes to prioritize partial stop/yield intersection control improvements in lieu of a roundabout or traffic light at the SR 10 on and off ramp exits.

- *Comments were received in support of landscaping, decorative bus shelters, and upgraded lighting along the corridor.*

The installation of lighting, landscaping, and wayfinding will be considered where appropriate throughout the corridor following ACC's standards for lighting. Decorative bus shelters may also be considered as part of this project.

- *Commenters acknowledged that the project must be able to use Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) grant \$25 million funding. Commenters suggested a three-lane option would better meet the intentions of the RAISE by improving safety, offering better bike/pedestrian facilities, and improving economic competitiveness.*

RAISE grant eligibility required that applicants demonstrate a strong benefit-cost analysis, community engagement, and alignment with sustainability and equity goals set by the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT). This project was awarded as part of the RAISE 2022 round of projects, though this grant has been renamed to the Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development (BUILD) grant. For more information about the current BUILD program, please visit: <https://www.transportation.gov/BUILDgrants>. Both proposed alternatives would be consistent with the BUILD grant description of providing reliable, safe, and affordable multi-modal transportation options along North Avenue. One of the foremost project goals is to improve economic prosperity through increased connectivity and mobility; specifically for transit-dependent populations.

- *Commenters expressed concern about the current lack of pedestrian and bike accommodations for the bridges over the loop. It is dangerous.*

Both the Open House Alternative and the Commission Defined Option include improvements to pedestrian facilities along the project corridor, including continuation of these facilities across the SR 10 loop. The Open House Alternative proposed implementing a roundabout at SR 10 and North Avenue with pedestrian and bicycle crossings. The Commission Defined Option proposes to implement partial stop/yield intersection control improvements at this intersection. As noted above, under this Commission Defined Option, separate bicycle and pedestrian facilities are being studied.

- *Commenters expressed concern about timing of online survey preceding the open house. One commenter noted that different maps would help the materials be more understandable and better project illustrations and rendering around intersections would also help.*

In the days between advertising the open house and when the open house was held, not all the project information was available on the website. However, by the date of the open house (October 22, 2024), the website was updated to include all the information presented at the in-person open house. In addition, the online survey, and the comment form available at the open house included the same project details and questions. The open house itself was staffed by project team members so attendees could ask questions directly. For those who could not attend the open house, phone numbers and other means were provided to contact staff and reach out directly if anyone had questions. The project is currently still in the preliminary design phase. Many project details, such as those around intersections, have yet to be designed.

- *Comments were received expressing confidence that emergency vehicles can handle the road diet. They handle the reduced lanes on Prince Avenue, and North Avenue has less traffic than Prince Avenue.*

The Open House Alternative would ensure that emergency vehicles are able to navigate the proposed design. The Commission Defined Option proposes to keep the five existing lanes, so emergency vehicles would be able to use the corridor as they can now.

- *Commenters expressed that the design of the project should benefit the residents, property owners, business owners, business patrons, pedestrians, and commuters. It should focus on benefits to that community, such as health benefits, noise reduction and reduced risk of pedestrian fatalities, instead of making it easier for a high volume of vehicles to travel quickly along North Avenue. Speeding traffic would negatively impact the prosperity of the neighborhood, and it is important that access to businesses along North Avenue should be maintained.*

The Commission Defined Option proposes to keep the five existing lanes along the corridor, and the need for separate bicycle and pedestrian facilities under this alternative is still being studied. The Open House Alternative proposes a road-diet prioritizing pedestrian, bicycle, and transit spaces. In previous studies this type of road-diet has been shown to increase health benefits, reduce noise impacts, and provide economic prosperity for local businesses. Economic prosperity is one of the foremost project goals, and access will not be removed to any of the local businesses as a part of the proposed project under both the Open House Alternative and the Commission Defined Option.

- *Commenters expressed support for both the Loop Crossing Alternative 1A and 1B.*

The Open House Alternative proposed two alternatives for the SR 10 North Avenue intersections. The Loop Crossing Alternative 1A proposes to maintain separate on

and off ramps to SR 10 and have the multiuse path cross from the east side of North Avenue, under the bridges to the west side. Alternative 1B would replace the existing separate on and off ramps with one ramp. Both Loop Crossing Alternatives are no longer under consideration under the Commission Defined Option. Instead, the Commission Defined Option proposes to implement partial stop/yield intersection control improvements at this intersection.

- *Comments were received opposing the Commission Defined Option.*

The Commission Defined Option is currently under review. As noted above, this option includes: a 5-lane typical section for the corridor with facilities for pedestrians and cyclists; partial stop/yield intersection control improvements at SR 10 exit ramps; and an 8-foot decorative screen wall along the property line on the North Avenue side of Advantage and along the property line on the Bray Street Side of Advantage.

This option has been identified as being advanced for further design/engineering based on the November 6, 2024, Commission vote. The design team is still conducting studies to assess the feasibility of the goals defined by this alternative.

- *Comments were received in opposition to the project because traffic on North Avenue will increase due to the Classic Center Arena.*

Traffic analysis was completed for the corridor, and even after doubling the estimated traffic impact from the Classic Center Arena, the Open House Alternative was determined satisfactory. The Commission Defined Option proposes to maintain the current five-lane configuration along the corridor. This alternative would not significantly affect the flow of automobile traffic.

- *Commenters expressed concerns about safety due to the unhoused population along North Avenue.*

The Open House Alternative addressed safety for all users of the North Avenue corridor. In particular, the Open House Alternative provided more separation between sidewalks and road and enhanced the crossing distance by a lane to address safety. The Commission Defined Option also provides safe pedestrian improvements that will benefit all users and additional safety measures are under consideration.

- *Comments were received in support of wider multiuse paths.*

Both the Open House Alternative and the Commission Defined Option include improvements to bike and pedestrian facilities along the project corridor. The design team is in the process of evaluating the corridor's potential for separate facilities for cyclists and pedestrians under the Commission Defined Option. The Open House Alternative proposed widening existing sidewalks and adding a 12-foot multiuse path.

- *Commenters expressed a need for mirrors to be installed near Freeman Drive. It is dangerous to pull out of the driveway and a mirror would help see oncoming traffic traveling at high speeds.*

Thank you for identifying an area of safety concern along the corridor. Our Traffic Engineering Division does not install or maintain mirrors on roadways. All current ones that exist in the ROW are privately owned. The design team will evaluate sight distances within the project area and incorporate safety features as appropriate to improve ingress and egress.

- *Commenters expressed a desire for more parks and recreation spaces for the community in this area.*

One of the foremost goals of the proposed project is connectivity for all to other amenities in the community. Both the Open House Alternative and the Commission Defined Option would allow for greater access to recreation spaces via pedestrian and bicycle paths such as North Oconee River Park, North Oconee River Greenway Trail, Dudley Park, etc.

- *Commenters expressed a desire for better access to transit in the area. Transit needs to be more efficient and reliable.*

One of the foremost goals of the proposed project is mobility for those who are transit dependent. This project will allow for greater safety when accessing transit stops. Issues concerning frequency along bus routes can be directed to ACC Transit Planners: Tina Wu, Transit Planner II at (762) 400-6896; or Jeremy Barnett, Transit Planner II at (762) 400-6898. Additionally, public comments are currently open on the Transit Development Plan from February 3rd through March 4th. Please offer any additional input regarding transit here:

<https://www.accgov.com/2172/Athens-Transit-Development-Plan>.

Again, thank you for your feedback. Should you have further questions or comments, please contact the ACC Transportation & Public Works Department here: (706) 613-3440.

Sincerely,



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ACC Transportation & Public Works Department

cc: Honorable Mayor Kelly Girtz, ACCGov
ACCGov Board of Commissioners
Brad Griffin, ACCGov Interim County Manager
Andrew Sanders, Interim County Assistant Manager
Stephen Bailey, ACCGov Transportation & Public Works Director
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