



MEETING MINUTES

COMMUNITY ADVISORY COUNCIL MEETING NO. 4

Date: January 4, 2020

Time: 10:08 am– 12:15 pm

Location: I-526 Lowcountry Corridor Office, 5627 Rivers Avenue, N. Charleston, SC

Project Name: I-526 Lowcountry Corridor WEST

Attendees:

Gilbert Reeves, Ferndale

Larenda Baxley, Ferndale

Tina A. Baxley, Ferndale

David L. Johnson, Harvest Pointe Church

Ruth Mae Whitney, Highland Terrace

Nathaniel Bryant, Highland Terrace

Jeanaris Bannister, Liberty Park

Carolyn Varner, Liberty Park

Doris Twiggs, Liberty Park

Prayonda Cooper, Joppa Way

Tony Grasso, Russelldale

Rick Day, Stantec

Ryan White, Stantec

LaTonya Derrick, Stantec

Joy Riley, SCDOT (Project Manager)

David Kelly, SCDOT

Pamela Foster, FHWA

Yolonda Jordan, FHWA

Maxine Smith, Maximum Consulting (Community Liaison)

Carolyn Lecque, Maximum Consulting (Community Liaison)

Horrace Tobin, Community Office Manager

Jamelle Ellis, Empowerment Strategies (Facilitator)

Participant Summary:

Total participants: 22

Ferndale: 3

Highland Terrace: 2

Liberty Park: 3

Russelldale: 1

Adjacent/affected communities/agencies: 2

Community Liaisons: 2

SCDOT: 2

FHWA: 2

Community Office: 1

Stantec: 3

Facilitator: 1

Meeting Summary:

Welcome and Introductions

- Roll call
- Safety reviews/emergency exits

Administrative Items

- Meeting participants were reminded to sign in. Meeting was recorded for accuracy.
- CAC Meeting 2 minutes approved
- CAC Meeting 3 minutes distributed
- CAC Meeting 4 agenda distributed
- Overview of agenda items
 - 'Open Mic' Session - Distribution of comment cards to allow CAC members to ask questions or make comments via the facilitator.
 - Demographic Survey was distributed in CAC Meeting 4 packet.
 - A draft "Roles and Responsibilities" guiding document was included in the packet.

- Brainstorming Worksheet for potential mitigation ideas for recreational facilities included in CAC Meeting 4 packet
- Agenda Review:
 - Administrative Items
 - Open Mic
 - Roles and Responsibilities
 - Vision Statement Activity
 - Break
 - Poll members on meeting logistics questions
 - Outreach Update
 - Brainstorming Session: Potential Mitigation Ideas for Recreational Facilities
 - Summary and Next Steps

Open Mic

The floor was opened for discussion.

- The project team reiterated the importance of sharing accurate information on issues, including the project schedule, through the Office (the Office).
- CAC member emphasized limiting automobile access in the back of the Ferndale neighborhood for increased pedestrian safety.
- CAC member revisited the issue of beautification. Stressed that community members in Russelldale want to address the homeless population and vermin control.
 - Project Manager: SCDOT will demolish and remove everything in that area once the right-of-way (ROW) acquisition is complete.
- CAC Member asked who cuts the brush along highways where there is an accumulation of trash and overgrowth on the swales and in the streets. Asked about the possibility of erecting a façade to block visibility of the trash.
 - Project Manager: Although SCDOT has addressed some issues of trash removal in recent years, SCDOT does not typically manage issues with littering and municipal waste. If trash is in a SCDOT ROW, residents may submit a maintenance request for SCDOT to remove trash. SCDOT has agreements with some municipalities for trash maintenance along highways in Charleston County.
- CAC Member: North Charleston is the entryway to the city and more should be done to beautify this section of the interstate in a way that would make the community proud to welcome dignitaries.
 - Project Manager shared that the City of North Charleston was proposing a gateway entrance sign and landscaping at the Remount Road exit, but the project was postponed due to the current project (I-526 LCC WEST). The City does not want to damage or remove new structures because of the requirements of the current project. A gateway sign will not likely be installed until after the I-526 LCC WEST project has been completed, or it may become a part of the current project. SCDOT will hold a charrette to collect details, such as gateway entry sign, of the types of features residents would like to be included in the community mitigation plan.

- CAC Member: Near the portion of Deacon Street that was impacted after the first I-526 expansion, there is a ditch between the street and the railroad tracks where stormwater flow has washed away portions of the street and widened the ditch. Trees are being uprooted. It has become a safety issue.
 - Project Team: Stormwater management is an issue that has been mentioned in previous meetings and has impacts beyond this project. New ditches will be cut along the outside of I-26. The project team is not yet certain if the proposed ditches will address all of the issues associated with standing water and flooding, but some changes will impact current stormwater flow along that section of I-26.
- CAC Member asked if ditches could be replaced entirely by underground pipes. Ditches were supposed to be replaced by pipes in the last expansion. Those changes did not take place and water began to run off of the interstate. There was no access point for maintenance. The dirt eventually washed down in the backyards of residents who were against the fence because there was not enough ROW purchased to maintain it.
- CAC Member stated there is an unkept, clay cut-through path under the bridge near Piedmont Road which is not safe to walk through. Requested that weeds be removed for safety.
 - Project team member: A project goal is to improve walkways and sidewalks within the larger scope of the mitigation project.
- CAC Member indicated there are a few foot paths in Russelldale. Pedestrians cut the chain-link fence to avoid walking to Delta Street or Rebecca Street. Would like to see the project include installing sidewalks that provide better, safer access to Rivers Avenue.
- CAC Member would like to see flowering trees planted rather than non-flowering trees.
- Project team member: Community beautification will be discussed during scheduled charrettes.
- CAC Member expressed concerns that the current overpass (I-526 and Rivers Avenue) has a sloping edge where the homeless population congregates. Reiterated concerns about the homeless population.
- Project Manager: Homelessness is an issue in all urban areas. From a geotechnical standpoint, vertical walls at underpasses are not preferable, but the project team can look at what other cities have done. There is currently a more robust program to sweep those areas, but it requires regular enforcement to keep people out of those areas. The project team will consider methods for deterring vagrancy.

Roles and Responsibilities

- One objective of CAC meeting 4 was to cap the size of the advisory council and to establish equal representation from the four impacted communities. The advisory council currently has 20 people as outlined in the Roles and Responsibilities.
- The project team will continue to leave open seats on the CAC to invite future members from some of the more underrepresented communities
- CAC members discussed community attendance at community association meetings. It was noted that special projects and programs attract significant numbers of people. However, attendance is typically inconsistent after special projects or programs end.

- A goal for CAC Meeting 5 is to present the final Roles and Responsibilities document for the CAC.
- The project team proposed open houses to be held at the Community Office.
- Residents have indicated distrust of the project. CAC member expressed concerns about potential misinformation regarding the SCDOT I-526 LCC West being shared in community meetings.
- The Community Office staff will hand out flyers, go door-to-door in the impacted communities, and invite residents to visit the Office for more project details. Open House will be held on January 25th. The Community Office staff is open to suggestions from the CAC team on how to increase visitors to the Office.
- Some communities have larger numbers of renters who may not feel as invested in the mitigation process.
- Concern about elected officials potentially spreading incorrect information about property seizures was noted.
- CAC Members have handed out project information, including the schedule of community meetings and meeting invitations. It was estimated that about one-third of residents invited during door-to-door conversations have attended community meetings.
- CAC Member shared that some residents are concerned their property will be taken away or that they will not be paid the value of their property.
- Residents who are impacted on a daily basis by traffic congestion on I-526 tend to see this project as more important than those who are not.

Facilitator: What are potential strategies for addressing misinformation associated with the project?

- Television commercial
- Social media
- Discussion on how to increase social media traffic on the existing Facebook page. The project has already implemented a significant campaign to sponsor advertising targeted to the affected markets.
- Discussion about how to improve targeted advertising
- Community Coordinator asked if residents in impacted communities use social media as a primary communication platform.
- Residents have to trust the system in order to make it better. If they do not trust the project, they are not going to participate.
- Churches should be contacted to help inform communities about project details.
- Maximum Consulting is a local business who will serve on the project as the liaison between community members and SCDOT. One of Maximum's goals is to ensure accurate project information is being shared with residents and stakeholders.
- CAC members should direct questions from residents about the project to the Community Office.
- Legislation requires the project team to address or correct some issues based on cumulative impacts.
- It is estimated that approximately 115 residents will be displaced as a result of the project.
- The Project Manager explained that the CAC and Community Liaisons are allowed to communicate with the public through outreach efforts. SCDOT follows the Uniform Act which includes restrictions about when SCDOT can discuss specific details of the project with communities.
- Residents can contact SCDOT to ask direct questions, but SCDOT is not allowed to contact residents directly at this stage in the project to discuss relocations.

- SCDOT is allowed to use outreach to try to encourage community members to attend meetings or to contact SCDOT directly.
 - CAC Members are encouraged to share project information with community members now.
 - Maximum will meet one-on-one (face-to-face) with senior citizens who are not on social media, and who may not have email addresses to receive eblasts.
 - The project team will always show the worst-case scenario at the beginning of the process, however, they try to minimize the impacts associated with the project, wherever possible. SCDOT strives to minimize placing a resident in an undesirable situation.
 - CAC member suggested SCDOT use social media platforms to explain how the current I-526 LCC West project and process is different from the previous interstate expansions.
 - Some community residents remain concerned about past offenses associated with the I-26 expansion.
 - Concerns were expressed about the current public relations approach mirroring those from 20 to 30 years ago.
 - SCDOT should clearly explain how they will manage and implement I-526 mitigation differently than with the I-26 project. Explanations should come directly from SCDOT, not from community representatives.
 - Maximum Consulting will schedule radio interviews for the Project Manager. The Project Manager will be interviewed in person or by phone, and interviews will run continuously over the next few weeks.
 - Community Liaison would like SCDOT to pay for the advertisement in The Chronicle.
 - The CAC should guide the project about the most effective tools for conveying accurate information to the public.
 - Because there is only one CAC member representing Russelldale, which is in close proximity to Ferndale, the project team encourages collaborative efforts between CAC members representing these communities to promote awareness and outreach more effectively.
 - SCDOT team member requested a list of grievances from the I-26 project and specific steps SCDOT will take to avoid a repeat of previous offenses in the current project.
 - Project Manager would like to include the requested list in the impact analysis as a part of the historical and cumulative impacts.
 - The list should be made available to the community in order to emphasize and increase transparency.
 - Project Manager emphasized that laws have changed in the years since the I-26 expansion. During the I-26 expansion, laws were not as protective of communities as the current laws.
 - Community trust in SCDOT is an overarching and recurring theme.
 - CAC members provided personal examples of family members negatively impacted by the I-26 expansion.
 - Discussion about stormwater runoff at Deacon and Elder Streets that runs under the homes and causes homes to rot.
 - CAC Member asked how SCDOT would handle those issues today.
 - Project Manager stated that under current legislation, SCDOT would purchase entire lots. Residents will probably be better off allowing SCDOT to purchase their entire property so they can receive the full purchase price and apply it to relocating.
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- Because these communities have been affected in the past and are being affected again, people need to know their rights. The impacted communities have experienced cumulative impacts. Any unfair treatment throughout the mitigation process should be presented to SCDOT.

- Project Manager: Property value is based on your appraisal. Homeowners can provide information that the appraiser will take into consideration - including investments and improvements that you have made to your home.
- Appraisers use recent sales and comparable homes to determine property value.
- Residents may request an independent appraisal.
- Two ROW specialist are working in the Community Office, one day each week for residents to ask questions about potential impacts based on individual circumstances.

- CAC member asked whether a final footprint of affected homes has been established.
- Project Manager: An alternative to the project is the “No Build” option. Public comments received to-date indicate there is a large group of stakeholders/residents that do not want the I-526 expansion to proceed.
- CAC Member asked whether people who oppose the project live in or drive through the areas impacted by the project.
 - The Project Manager indicated that the data has not yet been analyzed but discussed the role of interstates as critical routes. Expanding an existing interstate is much less impactful than building a new interstate in another location. Because of the Charleston landscape, no matter what area is considered for expansion, SCDOT faces the same issues with relocation (displacement). Many of the impacted communities are African American, minority, or low-income. The current plan is less impactful than building a new Interstate in a new location.
- CAC member expressed concerns about not informing renters who live in the impacted communities about potential displacements. Although it is important not to cause alarm, it is critical that landlords are able to give tenants ample time to relocate.

- The Project Manager stressed that displacement for tenants is not anticipated for another 3-4 years. SCDOT is trying to create housing that offers options to renters. If landlords experience difficulties with retaining or securing tenants due to the pending project, SCDOT can pay protective rent or buy landlords out early as the project nears the 5-year target. That is included under protective rights in the laws.
- Similarly, hardship rules may apply. If an individual owns a house and needs to relocate but is unable to sell because the house falls within the project footprint, SCDOT can assist by making an early purchase of the house.
 - There are several scenarios covered by hardship rules. Residents are encouraged to visit the Office to ask questions unique to their circumstances.
- CAC Member asked if protections are in place to keep housing affordable long-term.

- The Project Manager indicated that the mechanism has not been determined to ensure long term affordability, but SCDOT is currently developing the terms. However, protections will be established.

- CAC Member asked if long-term residents with criminal backgrounds would be able to obtain housing in the relocation process since they will be required to have a background check.
- Project Manager: SCDOT will work with tenants who may face challenges associated with criminal background checks to ensure that everyone is relocated into affordable housing as a part of this project.

- CAC Member asked about the chance of this project not going through.
- Project Manager: The project is definitely needed. If we do not do this, we would have to do something else. Most of the comments SCDOT received for the “No Build” option included misconceptions about how transportation projects work. The primary reason people are opposed to the project is they want SCDOT to invest in improved public transit systems rather than improved or expanded roads.
- The funds used for the I-526 expansion are allocated specifically for interstate projects. If SCDOT does not use the funds allocated for the expansion of I-526, the funds will be used for another similar project in another area. Funds cannot be used for transit projects because they are earmarked for interstate projects.
- Many of the improvements residents are requesting as a part of this project are not included in the scope of the project. However, improvements to infrastructure that will result from this project will provide the foundation for many of the requested projects to be implemented more efficiently.
- CAC Member asked for clarification on “traffic management”
- Project Manager: Traffic Management is the infrastructure that helps to actively manage traffic. It includes features such as a traffic management center with staff to operate the cameras and controls during peak hours.
 - People who express a desire for “no build” typically fall into one of two groups: (1) “no build,” because it is not worth the community impact. Those people are less likely to drive on the interstate. (2) “no build” community members that drive on the interstate, but believe SCDOT can provide public transit, and put buses in one of the lanes on the interstate. This option is not possible.
 - There is also another group of people who understand the project is needed, but they want to make sure SCDOT is working in the best interest of the impacted communities.
- A project team member suggested scheduling a session to address the list of grievances associated with the I-26 expansion. It was recommended this be added as an action item to discuss in the follow up internal project team call.

Vision Statement Activity

Postponed due to time constraints. A brief clarification between the mission statement (statement of purpose) and vision statement was provided. Members were asked to think about their vision for the group as they transition from the CAC to the oversight committee.

Meeting Logistics Poll

Project team member conducted survey on meeting preferences of the CAC. The office is open five days a week and every other Saturday. CAC Members were guided through an Office Use logistical survey.

Survey results:

- CAC members prefer to meet on a recurring date & time, 1st Saturdays
- CAC members prefer to extend the meeting to 3 hours, from 10:00 AM – 1:00 PM
- CAC members would like the option to meet together outside of the regularly scheduled CAC meetings.

The public comment period has been extended to the end of January. CAC members were encouraged to have friends, relatives, and neighbors to visit the website or come to the Community Office to engage with project team and Office staff.

Outreach Update

Office Coordinator: Since the Office opened, there have been 107 visitors, approximately half of which represent the impacted communities. The office is averaging about 14 visitors per week, with a decrease in foot traffic during the holidays.

Brainstorming Session: Potential Mitigation Ideas for Recreational Facilities

- Project team members: There have been 291 comments (comment cards) submitted. Comment cards are being categorized by general themes such as noise, meeting experiences, meeting requests, etc. Questions were asked about various project dynamics, ROW, bus lanes, bike and pedestrian lanes, transit, affordable housing, environmental concerns, maintaining access to Rivers Avenue, alternatives for smaller maps displaying system-to-system interchange (N. Rhett Avenue and manage lanes), etc.
- There were 61 comments in support of “no improvements,” people who are advocates for alternative methods of transit.
- The 31 comments made at drop-ins are public information. Printed copies can be provided to CAC members upon request.
- CAC member asked about air quality related to existing traffic and air quality in the neighborhoods immediately adjacent to I-526 corridor. An air quality analysis will be conducted for the project.
- In upcoming meetings, the project team will address a path forward for mitigation based on the impacts and input gathered and prioritized from the Social Needs Assessment and Office forms. Some parcels that will be used for the replacement recreation centers have already been identified and are included in your packet. The CAC was reminded that the project team has not begun talking with property owners. The project team emphasized the critical need for confidentiality in the current stage of the project. The project manager reminded everyone that when the notification process begins, owners of parcels being sought for use for the replacement recreation centers must be willing sellers. SCDOT cannot force residents to sell. CAC members were asked to continue thinking about the value the community center will add to neighborhoods and to consider uses or services that may not yet be included in the plan. This will be revisited at the next meeting.

Summary and Next Steps

- Reminder to complete the Demographic Survey
- Reminder for CAC members absent from Meeting 3 to request missed materials
- CAC Members requested an email reminder one week prior to CAC meetings
- Open House flyers will be distributed to CAC Members at the Office on Monday, January 6, 2020
- CAC Members were encouraged to email questions, concerns, or ideas for meeting topics to Council@526Lowcountrycorridor.com or stop by the Office.

CAC meeting #5 is scheduled for February 8, 2020 beginning at 10:00 AM until 1:00 PM at the I-526 Lowcountry Corridor Community Office, 5627 Rivers Avenue, N. Charleston, SC.