

MINUTES

Blowing Rock Board of Commissioners

Thursday, May 15, 2003

The Mayor and Board of Commissioners for the Town of Blowing Rock met in special session on Thursday, May 15, 2003 at 4:00 p.m. Present were Mayor J. B. Lawrence, Commissioners Barbara Ball, Terry Lentz, Keith Tester, and David Wray. Rita Wiseman was out of town and could not attend. Also present were Town Manager Scott Hildebran and Town Clerk Barbara Beach. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss the proposed widening project of US Highway 321 with representatives of the NC Department of Transportation.

Mayor Lawrence called the meeting to order and introduced Missy Dickens, Project Manager of the NC Department of Transportation (NCDOT). Ms. Dickens asked each person to introduce himself or herself to the assembly. The following representatives from NCDOT were present: Greg Brew, Trent Beaver, Carl McCann, and Sam Erby. John Page and Reggie Scales, project managers from the engineering firm of Parsons Brinckerhoff, also attended the meeting.

In response to questions, Ms. Dickens confirmed that the widening of Highway 321 from Blackberry Road through Blowing Rock will be completed using state funds only. However, the Army Corps of Engineers will be involved in the project, and will be the lead federal agency in complying with Section 106 of the Historic Preservation Act. In compliance with Section 106, a memorandum of agreement regarding mitigation of impacts to the Green Park Historic District will be developed. The Corps, along with the State Historic Preservation Office, the NCDOT, and the Town, will sign off on this memorandum of agreement. The Section 106 consultation process (which will apply only to the Historic District) will be a separate process from the discussions that NCDOT will have with the Town Council regarding mitigation along the entire project. The Section 106 process and the discussions between NCDOT and the Town will overlap somewhat, but the Section 106 process will invite interested parties to consult, in compliance with the law.

Council had submitted a list of desired characteristics for the widened highway. Ms. Dickens asked members to elaborate on these characteristics. Council members suggested 1) landscaping, especially in the median and in between the sidewalk and curb and gutter areas, 2) minimal cutting of the mountains, and intelligently designed cuts where necessary, preserving vegetation where possible, or replacing removed vegetation with native plants and shrubs, 3) where necessary, cuts would be faced with construction of rock walls instead of rock that has been blasted, 4) wooden guard rails instead of metal ones, 5) construction that enhances the personality of the village, not a "straight shot" through Town. They would also prefer that the low rock walls in the Green Park area be replaced after road construction is finished. In short, Council members agreed that it should look like the Blue Ridge Parkway.

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Ms. Dickens suggested that Council members meet to come to a consensus on details, such as the preference that construction work stop during the busiest weekends, or that it continue around the clock to speed the process. Mrs. Ball asked if it would be more expensive to work around the clock. Ms. Dickens replied that it would be more costly, but it would shorten the time frame. She said that NCDOT would explore rough costs and the feasibility of any issues that concern Council members.

Council members inquired as to the projected time frame for construction. Engineers replied that it would be three to four construction seasons. Mr. Tester asked that NCDOT define the detour route for the project well in advance, and that it be advertised so that motorists will be aware of delays and the detour to avoid them. Ms. Dickens suggested that perhaps NCDOT could provide more public relations to advertise their website address to trucking companies and the traveling public to raise awareness of its availability. Mr. Tester suggested that local business could publicize possible delays and alternate routes in correspondence and brochures for their customers.

Council also asked if NCDOT had plans to pave the Globe Road and make it the publicized detour during roadwork. Mr. McCann replied that they do not consider Globe Road an acceptable detour, and they would rather plan on fewer closures of Highway 321 during construction.

Mrs. Ball stated that she is very interested in the plans for widening of the road at the 321/321 Business intersection. If possible, she would prefer a lesser area be disturbed at that juncture. Engineers replied that they plan a left turn lane at Green Hill Road, but not at Norwood Circle or at Country Club Road. Widening the road will result in improved sight distance. Members expressed concern about crossing two lanes of traffic for a left turn. Engineers replied that they have experts to plan turn lanes, but they will take another look at this area. They also plan a signal light at Skyland Drive, which will cause traffic to "bunch," providing opportunities for vehicles to turn left at Norwood Circle and Country Club Road.

Mr. Lentz assured the group that the Town wants to work with NCDOT in scheduling the construction or relocation of water lines adjacent to Highway 321. These lines were installed many years ago, and will need to be upgraded. NCDOT engineers replied that this work could be done at the same time as the burying of utilities that is to occur in association with the widening project. They expect the actual construction work to begin in 2008 or 2009.

Ms. Dickens announced that NCDOT is thinking of putting together a Context Sensitive Solutions team to provide information and concerns from the Town to higher level officials at NCDOT. This group would provide more continuity and give the Town more information and details to use in making decisions as to whether or not to pursue various specific concerns.

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Ms. Dickens also asked for more frequent meetings with Council, and members agreed to meet once a month. Council members suggested that Ms. Dickens set the dates, however, they agreed that most of them are available during the second week of each month, and that most members could attend on Thursdays after the regular monthly Council meetings.

Mrs. Ball voiced her concern that all the time spent planning could be lost if state administration or NCDOT priorities change. Ms. Dickens assured the group that the signed memo of understanding will preserve the agreement that has been made between the Town and NCDOT, and that document will be added to the EIS.

Mr. Tester asked when the project budget will be set. Mr. Erby replied that it has not yet been set pending the time for negotiations to be completed. Mr. Lentz questioned the typical percentage amount that NCDOT normally budgets for enhancements. Mr. Erby responded that NCDOT usually does not provide enhancements, however, they are committed to making this project a showcase. Mr. McCann stated that they are very close to being able to do the things that have been mentioned in the meeting today.

Mr. Tester requested a version of the timeline for key dates for the project. Mr. Erby replied that NCDOT staff will provide this to the Town. Ms. Dickens recommended the goal of completing the planning work with the Town by September. She will respond to Mr. Hildebran, flagging critical values that may take longer to resolve. NCDOT will begin the process of the meetings with property owners of the Green Park Historical District. Mr. Page requested that the Town let Ms. Dickens know when they can expect the Town's list of critical values so they can be reviewed before the next meeting.

There was no further business, and Mayor Lawrence adjourned the meeting at 6:15 p.m.

J. B. Lawrence,
Mayor

Barbara G. Beach, Town Clerk