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**Report to the Mayors of  
Cornelius, Davidson, Huntersville, Mooresville**

**From the  
Transportation Task Force**

April 2, 2008

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## **Formation of the Transportation Task Force**

In December of 2007, the Mayors of Cornelius, Davidson, Huntersville and Mooresville formed a group to deal with burgeoning transportation problems. These problems seemed to be daunting: congestion on I-77; funding the North Corridor Commuter Rail project; accidents on I-77 which caused local streets to become impassible; public demand for greenways, bikeways, and sidewalks which greatly exceeded the capacity of the towns to provide these amenities; congestion on local streets that had begun to degrade the quality of life of our citizens.

We should not have been surprised. Around 1980, each of our four towns had between two and three thousand people. Today, Davidson has approximately 10,000; Cornelius, 20,000; Mooresville, 30,000, and Huntersville, 40,000. While we have required developers to build their own streets and an occasional turn lane, the towns themselves have taken on most of the planning and execution. At the same time, NCDOT, which owns and maintains most of the higher volume streets in our towns, essentially has run out of money.

North Carolina has always taken pride in its transportation system. We have always recognized that good transportation means good jobs, good public safety, and good quality of life.

So the various streams came together: growing problems, shrinking revenues, and important history. Recognizing all three, the mayors asked ten citizens to form a task force to make recommendations on how to approach these problems.

The group has met weekly beginning January 2nd. With a clear nose-to-the-grindstone attitude, the group tackled an important issue each week: air quality, widening I-77, buses, land-use planning, thoroughfare plans and connectivity, bicycling, sidewalks, greenways, north corridor commuter rail and I-77 backups. In addition, we considered funding sources: TIF, synthetic TIFs, automobile registration fees, sales taxes and local property taxes.

Early on in our deliberations, the group realized that we needed a new organization to deal with these problems. All of us recognized that we could no longer go it alone. We recognized that there are few transportation problems unique to one of our towns; most such problems are common to all four. So, happily, are their solutions.

Another important conclusion of the task force: the sum of our efforts will almost certainly be greater than the individual parts. If we band together, we can solve transportation problems that no one of our towns can solve alone.

So we are asking towns to give up some local authority. We do so knowing that politicians rarely give up power willingly. But we are convinced that the outcome of doing so in this case will be a result that is superior to our four towns continuing to operate separately.

With a genuine spirit of cooperation in our group and a further expectation that this spirit will extend to the four governments, we ask our towns to come together to tackle transportation problems. The end result will make our communities better places to live.

## **Recommendations of the Transportation Task Force**

The Transportation Task Force recommends the formation of a new organization with

- representatives from each of the four towns.
- a mandate to deal with regionally significant corridors, vital intersections, transit, I-77 improvements, greenways, and subdivision impacts.
- a dedicated revenue source.

### **An Organization with a Vision**

Our new organization must have a clear vision for our four towns. It is not enough simply to deal with today's congestion. Rather, we must ask the more difficult question: What kind of transportation system are we leaving for our grandchildren? Will it be one that we will be proud to claim, or will it simply pass on to the next generation the same problems that we face today

### **Legal Form of the Organization**

There are three choices for a legal form of the organization: an authority, an interlocal agreement, and a voluntary association. The first, an authority, requires legislative approval and is probably unnecessary at this stage. The third, a voluntary association, will inevitably lose its effectiveness. Thus, we recommend that the new organization be formed by interlocal agreement.

### **Membership on the Organization**

We recommend the model of the Metropolitan Transit Commission: one vote for each town, with the Mayors (or someone designated by the Mayor) as the delegate, and the Town Managers (or someone designated by the Manager) as alternates. All eight would attend all meetings. One of the four towns will serve as fiscal agent for the organization.

### **Mandates**

The new organization should undertake the following tasks:

- Lobby for the widening of I-77.
- Speak as one voice on the North Corridor Rail Line, negotiating with CATS as a single entity instead of four separate municipalities.
- Develop a four-town road priority system which focuses on regionally significant road corridors. Specifically, these road corridors would include north-south and east-west connectors.
- Review major development plans from each of the towns to ascertain transportation impacts on the other member governments, and make recommendations to the governing bodies of the individual municipalities for mitigation of these impacts.
- Provide guidance to public safety agencies on transportation-related safety issues; an obvious candidate—I-77.

- Speak as one voice with State and Federal agencies for regional matters
- Support the Carolina Thread Trail.

## **Plan Review**

The Task Force believes strongly that we must hold ourselves accountable for the impact of our developments on our neighbors. Indeed, most of our current transportation problems result from our approval of development without consideration of the impact on other towns. Unless we change and deal with congestion now, we will find it roaring back later.

We recommend that the new organization bring sunlight to the plan-approval process. It will review major development plans to find how those plans impact neighbors. Then the organization will publicize those findings, and insist that the individual towns deal with the impacts before approving the developments. We believe that simply pointing out the untoward consequences of development decisions will have a significant effect and that towns will quickly realize that the old pattern of making land-use decisions has negative consequences.

## **Crossing County Lines**

Including entities in Mecklenburg and Iredell Counties, as well as two regional road-planning organizations and two NCDOT regions, cause both problems and opportunities. We will need to coordinate closely with all these groups. Two initial problems that the organization must solve concern the North Corridor: We must bring Mooresville into the MTC as a voting member and assist Iredell in finding revenue equivalent to Mecklenburg's half-cent sales tax.

Lobbying for improvements in I-77 also is clearly a two-county responsibility. Since we need to deal with that highway from south of Huntersville to north of Statesville, we must coordinate closely with Troutman and Statesville. We recommend that we invite those two entities to join with the new organization when we are discussing I-77.

We must also consider the exact geographical boundaries of the new organization. It should include the city limits of the four towns, and the ETJs of the three south towns. Because Mooresville has limited ETJ, the northern boundary of the new organization will need to be considered carefully and established early in the process.

## **Staff of the New Organization**

There must be staff exclusive to the new organization. It should start small, and grow only as the organization proves its effectiveness.

## **Revenue Sources**

The organization will fail unless it has a dedicated revenue source. Among the possibilities are

- An automobile registration fee

- A new quarter-cent sales tax
- TIF borrowing
- The federal RRIF loan program
- A property tax district
- Local property taxes collected by each town and spent by the new organization

The organization will require funds for road construction, for the local share of the North Corridor Commuter Rail, for planning and lobbying, and for other activities that will inevitably arise. We have estimated the revenue we can derive from an automobile registration fee, from a sales tax, and from a property tax. Each is attractive in some respects and unattractive in others. It will be one of the first tasks to sort out these possibilities. These estimates are included later in the report.

### **What is left to the towns?**

A great deal. Even though the new organization will lobby for I-77, deal with CATS, build significant streets and intersections and review plans for subdivisions, much is within the province of the towns individually: intra-town roads, station area improvements, sidewalks, bikeways, and greenways, and ultimate responsibility for planning.

### **Working with Other Parties**

A number of other parties—Lowe's, Duke Power, NCDOT, MUMPO, Lake Norman Regional RPO, Lake Norman Chamber of Commerce, and notably CATS—can be strong allies in this effort. We must work closely with these groups. There are many ways to do so, and the new organization must implement a system early on.

### **Naming the New Organization**

The name of the new organization should reflect both its geographical boundaries and its transportation and planning emphasis. One possibility is Mecklenburg-Iredell Transportation Commission.

## **Next Steps**

Within a month of the submission of this report to the four Mayors, each should seek the endorsement of the report by their respective town boards.

Following that endorsement, the Mayors should assemble a working party to construct an interlocal agreement. Membership of that working party should reflect as nearly as possible the membership of the governing board of the new organization.

Once there is a draft interlocal agreement, each of the four towns should consider it in early summer of 2008. This timing will coincide with the development of data on cost of the North Corridor by CATS, with the release of reports being prepared by statewide and countywide groups, and with the possible placement on the ballot of a new quarter-cent sales tax for roads.

Target date for having the new organization functioning: Labor Day, 2008.

## **A Comparison of I-77 and the North Corridor Commuter Rail**

In many ways, I-77 and the North Corridor are substitutes for each other; in other ways, not. Both move our citizens from Mooresville to Charlotte, and points in between. Both have reverse commutes so that citizens can travel from Charlotte to Mooresville, and points in between. There the similarity pretty much ends. Here are the differences:

The north corridor is less flexible. No mode of transportation allows us to go when and where we want as much as a private automobile on an interstate highway.

I-77 is more prone to break down because of accidents. The North Corridor will rarely break down.

The North Corridor provides us a new basis for land use patterns in our four towns, a pattern we have been implementing for nearly a decade. With the North Corridor, we can contain sprawl that comes from automobile-exclusive development; we can better establish a sense of place for our communities; and we can improve air quality. These benefits come in addition to the transportation benefits of the North Corridor.

The North Corridor is cheaper to build than four more lanes on I-77. At a total cost of around \$260 million, the North Corridor costs \$10 million per mile. Because it includes a reverse commute, this means about \$5 million per lane mile—a cost that includes both the road and the vehicles. Recent estimates for widening I-77 are approximately \$526 million or \$5 million per lane mile. But the North Corridor includes vehicles, whereas to travel on I-77, drivers mostly provide the vehicle, thereby making the cost of road and vehicle much higher than the North Corridor.

One lane on I-77 will carry around 2,000 cars per hour. The North Corridor can carry several times that number of passengers per hour.

Widening I-77 will assist people from Florida to Ohio, a worthy goal. But the North Corridor is very much for our citizens.

The plan for building the North Corridor is moving on schedule. Widening I-77 has no schedule.

For the North Corridor, the four towns' share of the cost is known approximately. Widening I-77 has unknown costs and a potential unknown local share.

The North Corridor is at a now-or-never point. If we do not press for the North Corridor, we will go to the back of the CATS corridors line, and no one knows when we will move up to the front of the line again.

The Task Force has been looking at a vehicle registration fee to fund the North Corridor local share of cost, and we believe a fee of around \$30 will do so. Thus we should be asking our citizens: Are we willing to pay the price of a half-tank of gas per year to have the North Corridor, even if we never use it? Is it not worth \$30 per year simply to have it there, even if we never use it?



Even if the local costs exceed this amount, we must find a way to make the project work because its benefits to us are so much greater than its costs.

Clearly, the four towns must press forward on the North Corridor. This action does not relieve us of the burden of finding a way to widen I-77, but the North Corridor is real; its benefits are tangible; and its schedule is known.

## **Revenue Sources**

For illustration, here are our estimates of revenue that we can expect from each of three sources: an automobile registration fee, a quarter-cent sales tax, and a one-cent property tax.

[insert table]