

History

2007

In December 2007, the Record of Decision was issued. The ROD marks the conclusion of the project's environmental studies. It documents the NCDOT's decision to construct the preferred alternative, and presents and responds to comments received on the Final Environmental Impact Statement.

Also during 2007 the development of the final design continued.

2005-2006

The work on the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) continued in 2005. In September 2006, the FEIS was approved. The FEIS includes:

- Information included in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) with any needed revisions, including purpose and need, alternatives studied, and anticipated environmental impacts.
- Comments received from the public and environmental resource and regulatory agencies on the DEIS
- Responses to comments received on the DEIS;
- The identification of the Widening Alternative as the Preferred Alternative.
- Proposed impact mitigation, including mitigation agreements with the Town of Blowing Rock (MOU) and the State Historic Preservation Office (MOA).
- Special Project Commitments

2003-2004

NEPA/404 Concurrence Point #3 Meeting 2003

A NEPA/404 Merger meeting was held on January 15, 2003. The purpose of the meeting was to reach concurrence with state and federal regulatory and environmental resource agencies for the selection of a Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternative (LEDPA) for the US 321 Improvements Project in Blowing Rock. At that meeting, the Widening Alternative was identified as the LEDPA.

The North Carolina Department of Transportation, US Environmental Protection Agency, US Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, North Carolina Division of Water Quality, and North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission concurred with the selection of the Widening Alternative. The State Historic

Preservation Office did not concur with the selection of the Widening Alternative as the Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternative but agreed to consult with NCDOT and the US Army Corp of Engineers on mitigation of impacts to the Green Park Historic District in compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act.

Selection of the Preferred Alternative

In mid-January 2003 NCDOT selected the Widening Alternative as the Preferred Alternative.

Mitigation

During the Spring and Summer of 2003, NCDOT initiated discussions with the Town of Blowing Rock and residents and businesses owners of the Green Park Historic District for the purpose of discussing mitigation for project related impacts. This included, but was not limited to, Section 106 (of the Historic Preservation Act of 1966) consultation regarding the mitigation of impacts at the Green Park Historic District. The complete list of mitigation agreements was included in a formal [Memorandum of Understanding](#) which was approved by the North Carolina Board of Transportation on October 7, 2004, and the Blowing Rock Town Board on October 12, 2004. The final product of this process was a [Memorandum of Agreement](#) (MOA) between the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the State Historic Preservation Office,

2002

DEIS Public Hearing 2002

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) was published in June 2002 and copies were circulated to state and Federal environmental resource and regulatory agencies and to the public. For the public’s review, the document was placed in various locations in Watauga and Caldwell Counties and the central libraries of Wake, Guilford, and Mecklenburg Counties. The document was also made available to the public on compact disc and can be downloaded in PDF format from this website. The formal public hearing and associated pre-hearing open houses were held throughout the project area in late August as follows:

PRE-HEARING OPEN HOUSE	PRE-HEARING OPEN HOUSE	PRE-HEARING OPEN HOUSE	FORMAL PUBLIC HEARING
August 19, 2002 Chetola Resort and Conference Center Manor House Tent North Main Street Blowing Rock 4pm – 8 pm	August 20, 2002 Laurel Fork Baptist Church 229 Jake Storie Road (Located off Aho Road) Aho Community	August 22, 2002 St. Marks Lutheran Church 5570 Blowing Rock Boulevard (US 321 at Blackberry Road)	August 26, 2002 Blowing Rock Assembly Grounds Gym Address 7 pm

	4 pm – 8 pm	4pm – 8 pm	
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Also, a Summer 2002 Project Newsletter was published which discussed the DEIS, the alternatives under consideration, and announced the schedule for the public hearing and pre-hearing workshops.

POST HEARING MEETING

Following the hearing, NCDOT categorized and evaluated the oral and written comments from the hearing. An NCDOT post-hearing meeting was conducted on November 3, 2002. The purpose of the meeting was to provide an overview of the proceedings of the Public Hearing; to discuss the general content of the written and oral comments received during the review period; and to discuss the merits of each alternative in light of those comments.

2001

DEIS Assembly

From January to July project engineers advanced the preliminary designs for the roadway alternatives, preliminary landscape designs, and impact assessments and began production of the first draft of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). Due to the complex nature of the project, a determination was made that additional time would be required for a comprehensive review. A review draft of the DEIS was completed and submitted to NCDOT for review and evaluation.

The project team also initiated discussions concerning the public hearing format and the Section 106 Consulting Party regulations. A project newsletter was developed detailing the revised schedule for release of the DEIS and the Section 106 Consulting Party regulations.

2000-1999

Activities in 2000

From January to October, project engineers worked to refine and detail preliminary designs for the alternatives and held numerous meetings with NCDOT staff to coordinate efforts.

In February, project landscape architects and an historic resource specialist visited Blowing Rock to better understand the local context through touring the proposed corridors and meetings with citizens and stakeholders. The meetings will assist in the development of context sensitive design treatments for the widening and revegetation plans for bypass alternatives 1 and 4.

On March 21, the project economist visited Blowing Rock to perform surveys of local merchants along the existing US 321 bypass, realtors and various merchants along Main Street to assist in evaluating economic impacts.

In August, an historic resources field visit was performed by the Federal Highway Administration, National Park Service, National Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and NCDOT. The purpose of the visit was to familiarize the participants with the various issues surrounding the alternatives, including Section 106 and Section 4(f) concerns and potential constructive use issues related to the Blue Ridge Parkway.

A Fall 2000 project newsletter was published and mailed during the third week of September. The newsletter detailed the project status and highlighted some team member activities.

During the week of September 25, the project Construction and Constructability team performed a field visit to develop approaches to the project that would minimize construction disturbances for all alternatives.

During the week of October 9, stakeholder meetings were held with representatives of the project's Citizens Advisory Committee. The purpose of the meetings was to provide a project status report and gather additional citizen comments prior to beginning work on the impact assessment. Some of the meetings were attended by Mary Ann Naber of the National Advisory Council on Historic Preservation.

Video Presentation 1999

A video presentation was prepared to present the results of the geotechnical and origin and destination studies, the NCDOT's concerns related to the bypass alternatives, and proposed that project studies focus on a widening alternative that included amenities or enhancements. This presentation was shown to various local officials and the Citizens Advisory Committee members on March 8. Members of the general public also attended.

The NCDOT asked for comments on the presentation by May 10. Nearly 200 comments were received. About half of the respondents favored the Enhanced Widening Alternative, while the other half favored Bypass Alternative 4 (tunnel underneath Blue Ridge Parkway).

NCDOT Announces Decision to Study Three Alternatives in DEIS 1999

In a July 20 letter to various local officials and the Citizens Advisory Committee, the NCDOT announced that it would evaluate the Enhanced Widening Alternative, Bypass Alternative 1, and Bypass Alternative 4 in the Environmental Impact Statement.

Work to prepare a Draft Environmental Impact Statement began in September, beginning with updating the Statement of Purpose and Need, which will appear in the DEIS as Chapter 1. A newsletter was sent to the study's mailing list affirming the decision

announced in the July letter. Work on developing detailed bypass designs and a revised widening design began in earnest on January 2, 2000.

1998

Geotechnical Investigation and Origin and Destination Study 1998

NCDOT conducted a geotechnical investigation in 1998 surveying the widening alternative and four bypass alternatives. This investigation provided preliminary recommendations for slope requirements. It concluded that slopes, primarily those facing east, need to be flatter than assumed in the previous design studies.

An Origin and Destination Study (O&D) was conducted in September of 1998 to determine the amount of traffic going through Blowing Rock without stopping. There were 5,000 through trips that passed through Blowing Rock on the day of the survey. Nearly 90 percent of the through trips were trips to or from Caldwell, Watauga, and the surrounding counties. Nearly 75 percent were trips between home and work.

1997-1995

Bypass Alternatives Study 1997-1995

A new study of potential bypass alternatives began in 1995. On July 12, 1995, the first meeting of a project Citizens Advisory Committee was held to introduce the alternatives study, and discuss key issues associated with the study.

In August 1995, a scoping letter was distributed to regulatory agencies to solicit comments for the EIS study, initiate coordination for the project, and provide notice of an interagency scoping meeting, held on February 7, 1996.

On August 29, 1995, a Citizens Informational Workshop was held in Blowing Rock to present a land suitability map showing community, cultural, and natural features in the project area and solicit comments on the study, alternatives, and potential environmental impact issues. The desire for an alternative that crossed the Blue Ridge Parkway, including a tunnel crossing, was expressed.

Conceptual design criteria specifying grade and curve requirements, and a roadway typical section were prepared. Potential bypass alternatives were developed by the study team. They included four alternatives proposed by the Concerned Citizens of Blowing Rock. None of the alternatives proposed crossed the Blue Ridge Parkway.

A second Citizens Advisory Committee meeting was held on November 11, 1995 to review workshop and agency scoping comments, the land suitability map, and potential bypass alternatives. On February 7, 1996, an Interagency/Steering Committee meeting

was held. Traffic studies and potential bypass alternatives were presented. A third Citizens Advisory Committee meeting was held on March 27, 1996 to review traffic, level of service, and design criteria for the potential bypass corridors. The feasibility of a Parkway crossing from a traffic perspective also was discussed.

Functional designs for 10 bypass alternatives were prepared. The alignments submitted by the Concerned Citizens of Blowing Rock were refined to form four corridors. A fifth corridor was a refined version of the bypass alternative presented as the "most reasonable" bypass alternative in the 1994 Environmental Assessment. Five additional corridors were developed by the study team and reflected alternative ways for passing through the Blowing Rock Assembly Grounds. The refinements to the Concerned Citizens of Blowing Rock's alternatives allowed them to more closely follow the existing terrain, reducing the amount of potential excavation and cost.

A fourth Citizens Advisory Committee meeting was held on July 31, 1996 to present the potential bypass alternatives and discuss their potential traffic, social, natural resource, and visual impacts. Committee members were asked to list the criteria they considered important when selecting reasonable bypass corridors and to select the alternatives they believed should be compared to the widening alternative in an Environmental Impact Statement. The selection criteria identified most by committee members, in order, were community impact, safety, efficiency of traffic movement, and cost. The NCDOT re-affirmed its decision not to pursue bypass alternatives that cross the Blue Ridge Parkway.

A second Citizens Informational Workshop was held on August 1, 1996 to present the potential bypass alternatives and their potential traffic, social, natural resource, and visual impacts to the general public. Opposition to the bypass alternatives proposed by the study team was universal. Those who identified themselves as living in Caldwell County and in the rural areas in Watauga County generally supported the widening alternative. Most others indicated that crossing the Blue Ridge Parkway and building a bypass that is completely out of Blowing Rock was the only reasonable option.

At the urging of the Blowing Rock Town Council, the Concerned Citizens of Blowing Rock, and citizen comment, the NCDOT decided to examine several new alternatives proposed by the Concerned Citizens of Blowing Rock. The Concerned Citizens provided maps showing its preferred bypass locations and design parameters. The study team met with representatives of the Concerned Citizens prior to completing its designs to affirm that the designs met their expectations. The only expectation not met was tunnel length.

The tunnels were made longer than desired by the Concerned Citizens for two reasons: 1) the width of the ridge through which the tunnel passes is greater than the tunnel length desired by the Concerned Citizens and 2) a longer tunnel allows natural slopes to be retained above the portal end wall. Experience with other tunnels in the southeastern United States indicates that the height of portal cuts should be minimized to reduce the possibility of significant stability problems both during construction and in service. Stabilizing unstable cut slopes can be expensive. Stabilizing a cut slope above the portal end wall is particularly important because unlike cut slopes that parallel a highway, any

rock that falls off slopes above the portal will fall directly on the highway or a passing vehicle.

A second Interagency/Steering Committee Meeting was held on December 17, 1996. At this meeting, the original alternatives and the additional alternatives proposed by the Concerned Citizens of Blowing Rock were presented along with an assessment of each. A request was made that the assessment be restructured and mailed to members of the Interagency/Steering Committee Meeting. Thus, a questionnaire was developed that presented the advantages and disadvantages of the alternatives and asked for preferences. Copies were sent to members of the Citizens Advisory Committee and representatives of various cultural and natural resource agencies. Responses to the questionnaires were used to help the study team select those bypass alternatives that will be compared to the widening alternative in the Environmental Impact Statement.

In 1997, the NCDOT and the Federal Highway Administration selected four bypass alternatives to be evaluated in detail with the widening alternative in the DEIS. The alternatives selected and the reasons why they were selected were:

- Bypass Alternative 1 (called Alternative E during the alternatives study)
 - It is the shortest and least expensive bypass alternative.
 - It can be designed to avoid area historic resources.
 - It would have the least visual impact on the Blue Ridge Parkway.
 - It would have a minimal impact on the Blowing Rock Assembly Grounds.
- Bypass Alternative 2 (Alternative FH)
 - Like Bypass Alternative 1, this alternative can be designed to avoid area historic resources.
 - Unlike Bypass Alternative 1, its northern terminus is not at Possum Hollow Road, but between the Parkway and the northern-most residential subdivision.
- Bypass Alternative 3 (Alternative CC-CH)
 - In the past, representatives from the Concerned Citizens of Blowing Rock have indicated that the best corridor for returning a bypass to US 321 south of the Parkway was one that remained as close to the Parkway as possible.
 - It bypasses the final curves on existing US 321 before Blowing Rock, an area where sharp curves and steep grades would remain with the widening alternative, a feature also important to several citizen representatives.
- Bypass Alternative 4 (Alternative CC-I) (tunnel)
 - It avoids the Town of Blowing Rock by ending north of the Parkway, a feature important to the Town Council of Blowing Rock, the Concerned Citizens of Blowing Rock, and several members of the project's Citizens Advisory Committee.
 - Like Bypass Alternative 3, it bypasses the final curves on existing US 321 before Blowing Rock, an area where sharp curves and steep grades would remain with the widening alternative.

None of the alternatives selected in 1997 for further study and comparison to the widening alternative performed well on all evaluation criteria: engineering, cost, traffic, and environmental (natural and social). Based in the information known to date, the NCDOT could not conclude that any of the bypass alternatives are reasonable alternatives. Each of the four selected for further evaluation offered a different set of trade-offs, particularly between social and natural resource impacts. They, in combination with the widening alternative, appeared to be a set of alternatives that best represented the differing issues and concerns associated with the US 321 improvements project.

The decision to pursue the four bypass alternatives and the widening alternative was presented for discussion at a fifth meeting of the Citizens Advisory Committee on June 24, 1997. Blowing Rock and other local officials also were invited to the meeting and numerous citizens observed the meeting. The Blowing Town Council passed a resolution on October 20, 1997 saying that all five alternatives were "unacceptable in addressing the Town's transportation needs." They offered no other alternatives.

1994-1989

Environmental Assessment 1994-1989

The US 321 Improvements study began in late 1989 as strictly a widening project. The desire for a Blowing Rock bypass was first expressed at the first Citizens Informational Workshop on January 25, 1990 and again at a second workshop on June 21, 1990. Numerous locations for a bypass were suggested.

In February 1991, a scoping letter was distributed to regulatory agencies requesting comments on several Blowing Rock bypass alternatives. The corridors discussed were based, in part, on citizen suggestions. They are discussed in the August 1993 Federal Environmental Assessment (EA).

The bypass alternatives in the 1993 EA were evaluated in terms of length of new construction versus widening, length in severe terrain, number of bridges, change in travel distance, neighborhoods/communities affected, displacement, relationship to the Blue Ridge Parkway, other community issues, forest wildlife habitat lost, and proximity to streams. A single "most reasonable" bypass alternative was selected for comparison with the widening alternative. Construction and right-of-way costs were estimated for the "most reasonable" bypass alternative. The current Bypass Alternative 1 is a refined version of this alternative.

In August 1993, the EA proposed that US 321 be improved to four lanes from NC 268 at Patterson to US 221 in Blowing Rock. It listed a widening project as the preferred alternative and concluded that a bypass around Blowing Rock was not reasonable.

Following a public hearing, a Federal Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) was

released in September 1994 for the widening project between NC 268 and SR 1500 (Blackberry Road). Based on hearing and agency comments, the FONSI stated that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) would be prepared for US 321 improvements from SR 1500 to US 221 in Blowing Rock and would include consideration of a Blowing Rock bypass.

