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B.O.

B.0 Stakeholder Interviews

Stakeholder Interviews

In order to understand the needs of various groups and individuals, one-on-one interviews were conducted with various stakeholders. These individuals were chosen by the MPO project team and included city planners, city managers, and departmental staff, members of the freight community, and neighborhood and business leaders. During the interview, each stakeholder was asked the following questions:

1. How does freight impact your organization? (if applicable)
2. What percentage of your company's finances are spent on freight related issues? (if applicable)
3. How does the existing network of roads, train tracks, bridges, etc. work in terms of the flow of freight? Are there any issues with trucks having to take indirect, inconvenient or bad routes? Are trains having to travel on tracks that are falling apart? If so, where does this happen, and what seems to be the problem?
4. What are your major safety issues?
5. How can the Metropolitan Planning Organization assist with any of your issues related to freight?
6. Finally, would you be at all interested in participating on the Gaston Urban Area Metropolitan Planning Organization freight taskforce? If so, how involved would you like to be?

A number of those interviewed shared concerns about road capacity along a number of routes throughout the region. One example that was provided is Peach Orchard Rd. in Belmont, which lacks the capacity to carry heavy trucks. The major freight company ABF Freight Systems is located on Peach Orchard Rd. and are forced to send drivers along a less convenient route in order to access I-85. One interview suggested that a study should be initiated to explore the viability of increasing the capacity of Peach Orchard Rd. Two other examples were identified in Cramerton. The under pass linking Cramer Mountain Rd. to 8th Ave in downtown Cramerton is too narrow for the current volume of traffic, which often results in bottlenecks. Similarly, US 74 narrows from three lanes to two lanes in preparation of the South Fort River Bridge in Cramerton, resulting in significantly slowed traffic.

A concern over the structural integrity of at least one bridge was also identified during the interviews. The Davidson Ave. bridge in Gastonia has recently been slated to be rebuilt under the federal bridge reconstruction program. However, there is growing concern over the amount of time it takes to move from planning to construction under the federal system. Gastonia has had experience with this in the past with the Tulip Dr. bridge, which was put under the federal system seven years ago and is just now being put up for construction bids. The US 74 bridge was also identified as being in need of reconstruction. Lanes are quite narrow, and the route will eventually be used to access the yet to be constructed Charlotte multi-modal facility.

Linked to road capacity is perhaps the most pervasive issue to emerge from interviews, the US 321 and I-85 interchange. According to many interviewees, due to the design of the interchange, queues and bottlenecks often occur on both US 321 and I-85, which can be both dangerous and inconvenient. When the interchange was constructed, a full clover leaf design was not possible because of the adjacent P&N railroad line. The line is no longer operational, however, which led many interviewees to suggest that the interchange be redesigned and rebuilt. Another issue related to the interchange is the fact that US 321 is currently not an STAA route. Freight companies such as ABF must therefore take alternate routes to reach I-40. Some interviewed believe that, especially if the interchange is rebuilt, US 321 should be changed to an STAA route.

A safety concern emerged in the interviews regarding at-grade railroad crossings. In Mount Holly, for example, the city recently completed a streetscape improvement initiative to make downtown more pedestrian-friendly. However, there is currently an at-grade rail crossing downtown that pedestrians must walk over, compromising the safety, and therefore vitality, of the pedestrian environment. Similarly, in Gastonia, a study was conducted last year on the possibility of removing four at-grade crossings on the Norfolk Southern line. Three removed, while one still remains. Some suggest that other crossings are dangerous and should perhaps be removed as well.

As for new road construction, a few interviewees expressed interest in the proposed Garden Parkway. Most hope that the MPO will advocate for that project and push for quick implementation. In the mean time, at least one interviewee expressed his hope that an interim short-term solution can be developed for freight while the region awaits the new route. For example, a connection between 279 and I-485 was identified as a useful short-term solution. Also, a bridge crossing north of Mt. Holly would be helpful in opening up access to I-77.

With regard to air freight, at least one interviewee noted that Gaston County is lacking an airport that can handle freight. He mentioned that the county had a plan and funding in place in the 1990s to construct an airport in the northwest corner of Gastonia, but that the initiative was killed by city council. He suggested that, in order for the county to remain competitive in the global economy, an air-industrial park should be constructed in the county that can facilitate just-in-time deliveries.

Finally, way-finding signage was identified in the interviews as an area in need improvement. One example is the intersection of Lakewood Rd. and Eagle Rd. in Cramerton where trucks are missing signs and accidentally ending up in downtown Cramerton. Such occurrences are a nuisance and have implications for safety as well.

While interviewees from different parts of the county identified local concerns, albeit with regional implications, many of the interviewees shared the same concerns. The US 321 and I-85 interchange was by far the most often mentioned issue; however, concerns regarding road capacity, intersections, and at-grade crossing often had many similarities. Many of those interviewed also expressed an interest remaining involved in the issues and participating on the MPO's proposed Freight Task Force.