



Land of Sky Rural Planning Organization  
**Technical Advisory Committee**  
**Virtual Meeting via the Zoom Platform**  
**Minutes – October 22, 2020**

**Attendees:**

Chair Matt Wechtel (County of Madison)  
Zia Rifkin (Staff to the RPO)  
Troy Wilson (NCDOT Division 14)  
Steve Williams (NCDOT Division 14)  
Aaron Bland (City of Brevard)  
Daniel Sellers (NCDOT TPD)  
Wanda Austin (NCDOT Division 14)  
Brian Burch (NCDOT Division 14)

Vicki Eastland (RPO Coordinator)  
Maureen Copelof (City of Brevard)  
Kevin Ensley (County of Haywood)  
Stephen Sparks (NCDOT Division 13)  
Hannah Cook (Sen. Program Eng. Div.13)  
David Wasserman (STIP Western Region Mgr.)  
Mac Morrow (City of Brevard)

**WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS**

Chair Matt Wechtel called the meeting to order at approximately 11:30am and welcomed attendees. He read the Ethics Statement, and inquired if there were any conflicts, which could preclude TAC members from participating and voting on any business items, to state such for the record, and to refrain from participation in the matter.

Vicki Eastland called the roll and quorum was announced.

Chair Wechtel requested approval of the consent agenda, which included the June 25 minutes and the agenda.

**PUBLIC COMMENTS**

No public comments were made.

**APPROVAL OF CONSENT AGENDA**

***Kevin Ensley moved to approve the consent agenda. Maureen Copelof seconded, and the motion carried upon a roll call vote, and without further discussion.***

**BUSINESS**

**Rural Transit Providers FTA 5310 Elderly and Persons Living with Disabilities Application and RPO Letters of Support**

NCDOT Public Transit Division (PTD) requires public transit providers to reach out to their MPO/RPO planning partners for letters of support for their applications for Federal Transit Agency (FTA) Section 5310 funds. The (FTA) Section 5310 Enhanced Mobility for Seniors and Individuals with Disabilities provides funds for programs and projects that aim to improve mobility for seniors and individuals with disabilities by removing barriers to transportation services and expanding mobility options.

Due to several factors, COVID-19, CARES Act funds additional reporting burdens etc. The Grant filing deadline has been pushed back to December 1. This deadline is usually in November. Because of this delay, some systems do not have their grant request numbers finalized. The RPO TCC and TAC are not scheduled to meet again before the December deadline. There is no action required today; this is just a reminder that RPO staff would provide the transit systems and any other eligible applicant, i.e., the Land of Sky Senior Companion Program, with letters of support.

**No action required. Information only.**

Resolution to Adopt the Hellbender Regional Trail Plan

At the September 2019 LOSRPO TAC meeting, Tristan Winkler, FBRMPO Director, provided a presentation on the concept of a regional trail plan with a goal of documenting a vision of a connected trail system based on locally adopted plans, stitched together, and a brand for the system.

The development of the plan was guided by the Regional Trail Workgroup comprised of the MPO's Prioritization Subcommittee and advocates appointed to represent the Counties of Buncombe, Henderson, Haywood, Transylvania, and Madison. Additional local staff who play a major role in trail development in the region were invited to attend these meetings, as well as representatives from local governments and non-profits across the transportation planning area.

The workgroup developed, vetted and approved the Hellbender Regional Trail Plan, based primarily on locally adopted plans for greenway, multi-use paths, and other bike/ped facilities focused on paved trails but with exceptions for other infrastructure, where necessary. Sections of the Hellbender that do not currently exist in a locally adopted plan include the link from Weaverville to Mars Hill, a short section through Downtown Canton along Park Street, and a section from the Pigeon River to Lake Junaluska in Haywood County.

Due to COVID-19, traditional in person public meetings, workshops and presentations were not possible. The draft plan was emailed to various stakeholder groups and media outlets with the request that groups share with their networks.

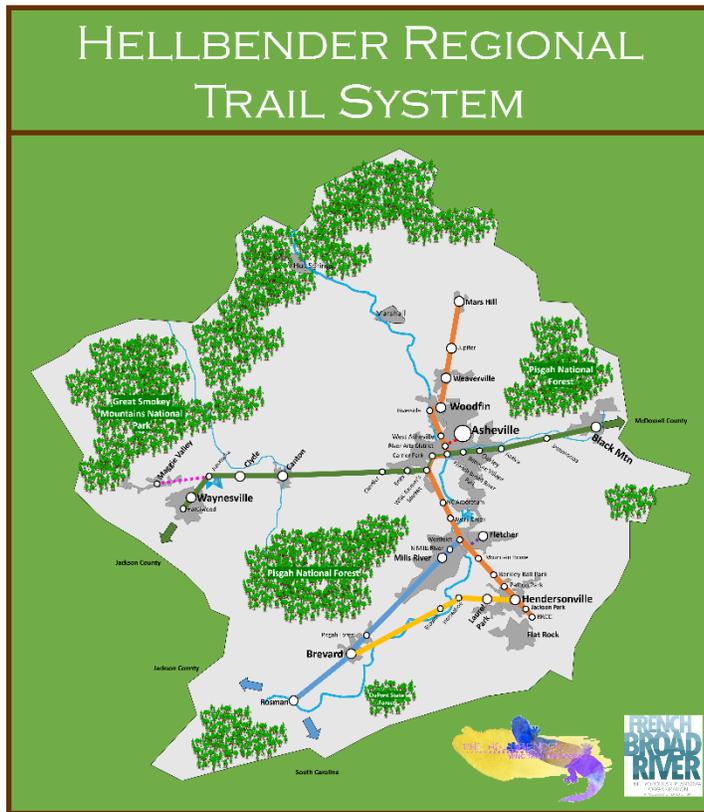
A total of 363 comments were received during the public comment period for the Hellbender Regional Trail Plan.

349 responses (96%) expressed support. Common themes included: Health/wellness, community benefit, economic opportunities, tourism benefits, safety to users, environmental protection, congestion mitigation, increased connectivity/accessibility.

9 responses (2.5%) were impartial with questions of timeline/implementation, inclusion of local trail networks, preference for impervious surface, rails-to-trails questions, and inclusion of broadband connectivity.

5 responses (1.3%) disapproved or raised concerns citing Right-of-Way impacts, increased crime, degradation of the environment and issues with name/branding.

At their September 2020 meeting, the FBRMPO Board approved the adoption of the Hellbender Regional Trail.



The Hellbender consists of four “lines” that connect the region:

**The Orange Line-** Mars Hill to Blue Ridge Community College (just south of Hendersonville)

**The Gold Line-** Hendersonville to Brevard

**The Blue Line-** Westfeldt Park to Rosman

**The Green Line-** Waynesville to Black Mountain

The Hellbender Regional Trail Plan provides the transportation planning region a document that connects local plans in a regional system, highlights planned trails that would have a regional significance, and provides a vision for what a regional trail system could look like. Such a system could provide residents and visitors more options to recreate and exercise while also

providing opportunities for environmental enhancements and economic development.

It is important to note that the Hellbender is a long-term vision. Currently there are 12 miles of the estimated 150 miles system on the ground. This is a major infrastructure project spread across multiple jurisdictions. Given current transportation funding policies and investment levels, a 50-year timeframe is realistic for completion of a system of this magnitude.

The adoption of the Hellbender Regional Trail Plan is a first step. The Regional Trail Work Group, FBRMPO, and LOSRPO will continue to raise awareness of on-going activities and consider further marketing and partnerships to assist local and regional efforts for advancing the Hellbender Trail.

The Hellbender Regional Trail Plan is available here:  
<http://frenchbroadrivermpo.org/multimodal/>

## RESOLUTION TO ADOPT THE HELLBENDER REGIONAL TRAIL PLAN

**WHEREAS**, North Carolina General Statutes 136-211 enacted July 6, 2000, provides for the establishment of Rural Transportation Planning Organizations (RPOs) to provide rural entities a cooperative and unified voice in project selection and funding, and enhance their involvement in integrated multi-model transportation planning; and

**WHEREAS**, the Transportation Advisory Committee is the duly recognized transportation decision-making body of the Land-of-Sky Rural Planning Organization; and

**WHEREAS**, the North Carolina Department of Transportation maintains a Complete Streets Policy whose cost share formulas are based on planned bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure being documented in adopted plans; and

**WHEREAS**, numerous communities in the Land of Sky Rural Planning Organization (LOSRPO) and the French Broad River Metropolitan Planning Organization (FBRMPO) have developed bicycle, pedestrian, and/or greenway plans; and

**WHEREAS** the LOSRPO Transportation Advisory Committee supports safe transportation infrastructure for all modes and users.

**NOW THEREFORE**, be it resolved that the Land-of-Sky Rural Planning Organization Transportation Advisory Committee hereby endorses and approves the Hellbender Regional Trail Plan.

**ADOPTED:** This the 22<sup>nd</sup> day of October 2020.

***Maureen Copelof moved to approve the resolution adopting the Hellbender Regional Trail Plan. Kevin Ensley seconded and the motion carried upon a roll call vote and without further discussion.***

### NCDOT STIP Revision/NCDOT Funding

Due to several factors that impact NCDOT revenues, a revised 2020 – 2029 STIP was presented to the NCBOT at their September meeting. The BOT voted on this revised document at their October 7 meeting.

Hannah Cook, NCDOT Senior Program Engineer- Western STIP Region, provided a presentation explaining the factors affecting revenues and the project scheduling impacts for LOSRPO projects. She communicated that even before the pandemic, the State was already facing budget issues due to storm response and legal settlements. With the addition of the COVID response, revenues were devastated. With the enactment of HB-77, STIP related changes included shifts in revenue from the Highway Trust Fund (HTF) to the Highway Fund (HF), the allowance of a \$700M Build NC Bond sale in FY 21, and an increase in the amount of GARVEE Bonds available, which could lead to an estimated \$2B increase in the NCDOT budget. Concerning project cost increases, there have been over \$3B in cost increases since September 2019, primarily from projects selected in P3.0 and P4.0. There has also been a large increase in right-of-way estimates, especially in urban areas. Improvements underway include reviewing all cost

estimates in the STIP, updating many estimates, and improving internal processes to ensure latest cost data is known for projects.

Project schedule changes include many projects that have been paused due to cash-flow issues. It will take time for those to restart, possibly up to a year or more. Hannah Cook also shared that relocating utilities can be a complex and lengthy process and the importance of programming enough time in the STIP for those activities. NCDOT needed to reprogram the STIP to meet federal requirements (and not jeopardize federal funding), provide realistic delivery schedules, and to update projects funded with BUILD NC and GARVEE Bonds as a result of HB- 77. The reprogramming process includes starting with a revised STIP budget and the programming of \$700M in FY21 BUILD NC Bonds first, which could be used on active construction projects and frees up traditional revenue sources for other projects. Constraints that had to be considered included annual fiscal constraint and STI law constraints. Reprogramming parameters considered included active USDOT grant commitments, realistic project delivery status, and recent substantial cost increases. Prioritization scores were considered, where possible to help determine funding priority for already committed projects across the NCDOT Divisions.

Hannah Cook reiterated that the reprogrammed STIP was a good starting point. Adjustments may be made as long as constraints are met. This process is similar to the typical draft STIP development. She noted that the schedules in the draft STIP, presume \$700M of BUILD NC Bonds sold in Fall 2020. The FAST Act expired September 30, 2020, however, the funding has been extended through September 2021 and it appears the intention is for Congress to take up reauthorization during the Spring 2021 session. Additional costs increases are anticipated and the full effects of COVID is not known at this time.

Hannah Cook reviewed the status of some of the key projects in the LOSRPO region including A-0010AA, R-5837, and R-5799, R-5800, R-5919 and R-5921, which have all had their schedules pushed out, sometimes into unfunded years of the STIP. These are not all of the projects shifted and she invited LOSRPO members to reach out with questions about specific projects.

**No action required. Information only.**

#### SPOT6.0 Update

Vicki Eastland provided TAC members with an update on potential changes to the Prioritization 6.0 timeline and process. She reviewed the available funding for P6.0 as of July 17, 2020, noting that the funding levels presented do not take into account cost increases received since that time. Vicki Eastland shared that additional costs increases have led to the Regional and Division Needs tiers in each Division to be overspent. A comparison of available funding for P5.0 versus P6.0 was provided and it was noted that the SPOT Workgroup was provided with some options, including not making any changes, to pause/re-assess after quantitative scoring, to push out the STIP by one-year, or to push out the STIP by one-year with a second submittal window. Vicki Eastland also noted that currently, consultants are not onboard for some of the POST project scoring work. She provided an updated P6.0 schedule, noting that more information should be

available in the coming months. Vicki Eastland shared a breakout of HB 77, providing the dollar amounts allocated for different NCDOT funding categories. She concluded that funding was grim due to the COVID situation and the decline fuel tax revenue due to the decrease in vehicle miles traveled (VMT).

She encouraged TAC members to consider that cascading projects might not be the best way to handle big projects moving forward.

***No action requested. Information only.***

**PUBLIC COMMENT**

No public comments were made.

**REGULAR UPDATES AND ANNOUNCEMENTS**

NCDOT Division 13 & 14 Updates (Stephen Sparks- Div. 13 and Steve Williams- Div. 14)

NCDOT TPD Update (Daniel Sellers)

Staff Updates (Vicki Eastland)

**ADJOURNMENT**

***Kevin Ensley moved to adjourn the meeting. Maureen Copelof seconded, and the meeting adjourned at 12:49pm.***