

Memorandum

Date: February 27, 2012
To: Gary Jackson, City Manager
From: Ken Putnam, PE, Transportation Department Director
Re: Charlotte Street Corridor

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide an update and to seek guidance for further staff action regarding the Charlotte Street Corridor which is defined as that section of street from the I-240 westbound on/off ramps to Edwin Place. The subject corridor has a total length of about 0.50 mile.

The planning process began in 1996 when City Council directed the Planning Department to develop a small area plan for the subject corridor. Background information including historical development and existing conditions was collected and an Advisory Committee was established. The Advisory Committee designed a planning process that included community workshops/meetings and an intensive two-day design charette. The results of the charette were intended to be used as a foundation from which to develop the plan, rather than as a final product. One of the recommendations from the charette process was to **explore** the possibility of creating a redesigned right-of-way along Charlotte Street between Chestnut Street and Edwin Place that would include two through movement traffic lanes and a center left-turn lane.

A statement included on page 3 of the document entitled "Asheville City Plan 2010 Charlotte Street Corridor Plan" indicates that a traffic corridor analysis prepared by the City's Engineering Department during August 1997 concluded that a three-lane section would reduce the overall level of service to "F", which is not good. Unfortunately, staff has been unable to locate that specific analysis and therefore cannot verify the results.

Following the charette process, additional meetings were held, recommendations were eliminated and added, the draft plan was prepared and shared with the Advisory Committee and the community through an informal public meeting, and then it was presented to the Planning and Zoning Commission and the City Council for review and adoption. City Council adopted the plan on January 12, 1999 (Resolution # 99-11). The intention of the plan, as adopted, was to serve as a guide for future development and improvements along Charlotte Street. In addition, the Charlotte Street Transition Overlay Zoning District was approved by City Council on April 25, 2000 (Ordinance # 2690).

During 2001, a study known as the "Charlotte Street Transportation Enhancement Study" was undertaken by Kubilins Transportation Group, Inc. The overall goal of the study was to develop a **conceptual** design that would provide interim and long range enhancements to the Charlotte Street corridor through a balance of traffic analysis, responsive design, land use compatibility and substantive public involvement. As a part of the study process, the project team exhaustively researched known and available data and concluded that there were discrepancies between the traffic volumes listed in the 2010 Charlotte Street Small Area Plan and those collected by the North Carolina

Department of Transportation. Therefore, additional traffic counts were collected during March 2001 and these counts served as the “base” for the current study. Using the updated traffic counts, a traffic analysis revealed that reducing the roadway to include two through traffic lanes and a center left-turn lane produced similar modeling results as existing conditions (four lanes without left-turn lanes).

The Charlotte Street Transportation Enhancement Study, which was completed during January 2002, concluded that dissention remained clear amongst the various interest groups on the topic of transforming the corridor from an automobile dominated environment to a corridor where mobility options are balanced for all modes of transportation. One of the recommendations of the study was that a **comprehensive** study of traffic operations be conducted to model all affected intersections and to provide critical information regarding roadway geometry and signal timing and phasing.

During late 2009 and early 2010, City staff began meeting with concerned citizens who were interested in having the City take a more active approach to making Charlotte Street safer and more accessible to pedestrians. From the very beginning, staff encouraged the citizens to reach out to the area business owners and other community members in exploring possible changes to the corridor that would enhance the pedestrian experience (Although unsuccessful, City staff applied for a planning grant during the early part of 2009 as a part of a pilot program for creating walkable communities sponsored by the Federal Highway Administration).

The citizens formed a committee which is known as the “Charlotte Streetscape Committee” and they spent a lot of time during the past two years meeting with residents and business owners. They also circulated a survey and made a presentation to City Council on August 30, 2011. Their presentation to City Council emphasized their goal of identifying the least expensive and most effective way to enhance pedestrian safety and walkability along Charlotte Street that would not adversely impact the needs of the business owners. Overall, the results of the survey are consistent with public comments and suggestions received during the previous study periods. Many drivers use the street as a “cut-through” street to access other parts of the city and many pedestrians do not believe it is safe or comfortable to walk along the existing sidewalks.

A public meeting was held on February 6, 2012 at the Jewish Community Center with an estimated attendance of about 200 persons including four City Council members. The purpose of the meeting was informational **only**. No decisions were made before the meeting, during the meeting, or after the meeting. The format of the meeting provided ample time for questions and opportunities for public comment under the direction of an independent facilitator. City staff stressed the importance of receiving public comment at the meeting by oral communication and/or written communication. In addition, a public comment period was extended through February 17, 2012. Regarding the **possibility** of changing the existing four-lane section along Charlotte Street to a three-lane section, citizens were passionate on both sides of the issue (similar reactions have been documented in the previous studies). Some business owners located in the immediate study area are very concerned about potential loss of business as a result of any changes to Charlotte Street. Although there was not “clear cut”, overwhelming consensus regarding 3 lanes versus 4 lanes, there seemed to be consensus on the following items:

- On-street parking along Charlotte Street is not needed.

- Improvements to the existing sidewalks are needed.
- Do **not** change Charlotte Street to 3 lanes on a trial basis.
- The section of Charlotte Street between I-240 and Chestnut Street should be separated from the section of Charlotte Street between Chestnut Street and Edwin Place.
- Overhead utilities should be placed underground.

City staff has worked very hard during the past two years to provide guidance and information to our citizens regarding the process of implementing various approved plans that exist. We have strived to remain neutral throughout this time period and now we need direction before moving forward. Possible next action steps include the following items:

- Prepare a request for qualifications (RFQ) to perform a comprehensive traffic operations study that would model all of the affected intersections and would provide critical information regarding roadway geometry and signal timing and phasing (Estimated cost = \$50,000 +/-).
- Prepare a request for qualifications (RFQ) to perform a comprehensive study to determine how to make pedestrian improvements without changing the existing Charlotte Street footprint (Estimated cost = \$50,000 +/-).
- Do nothing (Existing conditions remain in place and no further action by staff).

Please let me know if additional information is needed.

KJP/