

NC Transportation Network/Strategic Transportation Corridors Regional Meetings/Statewide Webinar Comment Responses September 2014

In a series of eight meetings across North Carolina and one statewide webinar in May and June 2014, the NC Department of Transportation presented the draft recommended Strategic Transportation Corridors (STC) network. NCDOT received more than 120 individual comments and questions at the forums and in subsequent written comments received by the Department. Many of the comments and questions were similar. The individual comments and questions have been compiled and incorporated into the 19 questions shown below.

The comments prompted the study team to re-evaluate various aspects of the system connectivity, mobility, and economic prosperity elements and the associated maps from which the STC were identified. Overall, minor adjustments were made to the STC. Three changes are worthy of note:

1. Eliminating the ranking and stratification of corridors into either regional or statewide significance;
2. Updating the system connectivity, mobility and economic prosperity map criteria to incorporate missing elements, such as railroad lines as an element of freight mobility, the port at Greer, SC, and major industrial developments and to recognize the importance considering transportation investment needs in the state's more economically depressed Tier 1 counties
3. As a result of adjusting the economic prosperity criteria and the criteria application, adding US 158 in northeast North Carolina; extending the Jacksonville to Greenville corridor along NC 11 north to US 64; and extending the US 321 corridor in Ashe County into eastern Tennessee.

The specific question responses follow.

- 1. Question: What is the overall point of STC, how will they be used, and what is the funding plan for the STC?**

Response: In identifying a network of Strategic Transportation Corridors, NCDOT is establishing those transportation facilities deemed to be critical for achieving the State's economic development goals. This effort is a follow-up to the 2040 Statewide Transportation Plan (2040 Plan) adopted by NCDOT in 2012. The 2040 Plan recommended that the Strategic Highway Corridors (SHC) network adopted in 2004 be updated to reflect multiple transportation modes and changes in North Carolina's transportation demands. The STC is a planning tool intended to help the state identify critical travel sheds within its system. It will serve local planners by letting them know what corridors the state sees as necessary to preserve for connectivity, mobility and economic prosperity purposes.

The STC represent critical transportation corridors throughout the state, but there are no specific improvements recommended within any of the corridors. Therefore, there is no "funding plan" for the STC. While any facility, such as a highway, rail line, or airport, is eligible for funding through NCDOT's normal project funding process, there is no special consideration given to the STC in setting spending priorities.

- 2. Q: NCDOT has been using the SHC for planning and project development purposes. Why didn't the study evaluate all 55 SHC previously used by NCDOT for long-range planning?**

R: The STC process was designed to analyze the transportation system with a fresh set of eyes, based on goals, objectives, and criteria consistent with NCDOT's current overall goals and objectives. As such, this process did not start with the 55 SHC, nor were they specifically evaluated during this effort. The STC process involved identifying those corridors that best support the three transportation goals of system connectivity, mobility and economic prosperity. The result was the identification of 25 corridors considered critical for achieving those goals.

3. Q: How do the STC consider multiple modes in setting corridor recommendations?

R: In defining the STC, any transportation facility that met the goals of improving system connectivity, enhancing movement of high volumes of people or goods, and promoting broad economic prosperity was considered for inclusion. This was meant to recognize that an optimum strategic network would contain corridors that provide multimodal opportunity for mobility and economic development. Rail lines are incorporated into the corridors shown, and activity and movements at airports and ports also were incorporated into the corridor recommendations.

4. Q: Why do the STC only focus on existing corridors and exclude future new location routes?

R: NCDOT generally considers that North Carolina's transportation system is a mature system, accessing most areas of the state with at least basic services. In question is not the need for more miles of highway or rail, or more airports or seaports, but rather the types of service, in terms of speed or reliability that the system provides. Certainly there are some exceptions, primarily where cooperative initiatives with our neighboring states are involved such as with proposed high speed rail to Virginia, or expanded interstate highways, but even those are more about improving existing highways than building new ones.

5. Q: How do the STC reflect future conditions, such as population growth, or new activity centers and economic development projects?

R: The Governor's Logistics Task Force (GLTF), which conducted a review of the state's freight logistics needs to maintain and enhance economic activity, identified in its *Seven Portals Study* a series of "logistics villages" that could be hubs of future economic development activity. These hubs are anticipated to be in areas of current rapid population growth, as well as in areas where natural resources, transportation infrastructure, or industrial attractors provide opportunity for such projects. The Seven Portals study evaluated the readiness of about three dozen potential development sites for potential and readiness for development. The Strategic Corridors study team used that evaluation prepared for the GLTF to identify about two dozen logistics villages with development potential in the future. The NCTN/STC study considered the vicinity of these logistics villages as population and employment growth areas.

6. Q: Do the corridors consider the NC Department of Commerce's designation of economically depressed areas (Tier 1) and consider that transportation improvements are needed in these areas to create significant activity centers?

R: Responsive to comments received during public review of the draft STC, NCDOT revised the economic prosperity criteria used to define STC to identify principal transportation facilities providing access and mobility to counties identified as being Tier 1 counties. For example, US 158 traversing northeast North Carolina was identified as a critical facility for providing access to jobs or for improving prospects for new industrial locations.

7. Q: In considering mobility needs, how were traffic volumes for rural and urban areas used?

R: A basic consideration in identifying the STC network was ability of transportation facilities to move large volumes of people or goods across longer distances. NCDOT's statewide travel demand model was used to identify high volume rural or urban/suburban highways. For the rail system, rail tonnage data developed by the GLTF in preparing the *Maritime Strategies Report* was used to identify high volume rail lines critical to North Carolina businesses.

8. Q: How did the mobility needs map allow for significant traffic increases during peak tourist seasons?

R: Concern was expressed by commenters that the average daily traffic data generated by NCDOT's statewide travel demand model would not adequately recognize the heavy peak tourist season traffic experienced in areas such as the Outer Banks or the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Cherokee, and by extension the mobility challenges of those areas. While it is recognized that traffic "peaking" in these areas is not fully captured in the average daily traffic data generated by the model, the areas most likely to experience high seasonal traffic variation as well as high tourism activity are identified as primary tourism activity centers, and key access routes to those areas have been identified.

9. Q: What are prosperity zones and what was the study attempting to gauge with them?

R: The NC Department of Commerce established eight prosperity zones in the state. The zones are administrative regions designed to help coordinate economic development activities across a number of state agencies and geographic regions. The STC effort used the prosperity zone boundaries as the basis of identifying where stakeholder meetings for the study would take place. The study also used data from the Department of Commerce within those administrative regions to help define some elements of the economic prosperity goal and sought to consider needed connectivity between the zones as an element of the nominated STC.

10. Q: Why were sales receipts used instead of visitor counts to identify economic activity centers, since sales receipts favor urban areas?

Study metrics were vetted with the leaders of NCDOT departments; an Advisory Group made of up transportation and planning agency representatives; and leaders of business, tourism and economic development organizations. These stakeholders determined that visitor counts at major destinations did not provide an adequate measure of overall tourism activity and that sales receipts within NC counties would provide a better picture of the economic impact and potential of tourism activity.

11. Q: Is more information available about the details of the scoring process and the rationale for the stratification of corridors into statewide or regional categories? (Specific question about the scoring process included a request to explain how truck traffic was incorporated.)

R: This question pertained to the rating of nominated STC in stratifying them as corridors of either statewide or regional significance. As a result of comments received during the review process, NCDOT has decided not to pursue this stratification, thereby making it unnecessary to provide scoring details.

12. Q: How was North Carolina's agricultural economy considered in identifying the STC?

R: Agricultural activity was not specifically considered in defining STC elements.

13. Q: Is the data that was used to identify STC elements available?

R: The final STC report will include data used in developing the connectivity, mobility and economic prosperity maps. The final report will be available online.

14. Q: Will you incorporate missing elements identified during the stakeholder involvement process, such as rail lines, inland ports, hurricane evacuation routes, and shallow draft inlets?

R: Following the public meetings, the study team reviewed all comments and considered whether elements, such as those mentioned in the question, had been overlooked or should be added based on refinements of the STC identification criteria. As a result, some elements, such as the Wanchese Seafood Industrial Park and the Greer, SC inland port, were added as activity centers. Hurricane evacuation routes have not been added as STC elements. The study team also conferred with NCDOT's Rail Division to ensure that strategic rail segments were included. During this effort, it was recognized that every roadway leading inland from the coast is a hurricane evacuation route, with no roadway corridor being strategically more important than another.

15. Q: How will NCDOT ensure consistency with adjacent states' strategic corridors?

R: In developing the STC, consideration has been given to strategic corridor planning in adjacent states. Virginia has a well-defined system of "Corridors of Strategic Significance," and South Carolina has identified multiple strategic corridors within their definitions that connect to North Carolina. These were considered in identifying NC transportation elements that met the connectivity goal, but North Carolina's STC do not attempt to match adjacent states' strategic corridors.

16. Q: How does STC relate to funding projects under the state's Strategic Transportation Investments (STI) process now and in the future?

R: There is no direct or regulatory relationship between the STC and STI at the current time. STI is about funding allocations for NCDOT's six-year work program, while the STC are about establishing consistency in long-range planning for broad corridors. Scoring of projects under STI is very prescriptive according to HB 817, which created the initiative. Neither STI scoring or the project prioritization process are impacted for proposed projects located on the STC. Similarly, in defining the STC network, no consideration has been given to whether a project on the STC would be eligible for funding under STI. In order for the STC to influence or be a part of the STI process, amendments to the STI legislation would be required.

17. Q: How will identification of strategic corridors be helpful to MPOs and RPOs assuming all of the STC end up on the STI statewide tier?

R: As stated earlier, there is no direct relationship between STC and STI, nor does STC recommend specific transportation improvements, therefore one should not assume that the STC will end up on the statewide tier. Since the STC effort is a broad planning tool identifying the state's critical transportation corridors for preserving connectivity, mobility and economic prosperity throughout the state, MPOs and RPOs should consider the STC as they develop local transportation plans to ensure consistency with the statewide perspective provided by the STC.

18. Q: How will the STC be updated and is there a process in place for making changes or amendments?

R: NCDOT anticipates periodic updates to the STC, although a timeline for regular updates has not been established. Procedures for amending the STC will be included in the final report for the STC study.

19. Q: How has NCDOT taken into consideration the suggestions made that specific corridors be added to the STC network?

R: Following the public comment period, NCDOT's study team reviewed all comments made at the meetings or subsequently in writing. This included 50 comments regarding missing corridors. Based on the comments received, the criteria that were the basis for STC identification were reviewed to determine whether they should be refined to recognize the services provided by missing corridors. An example of this is the consideration given to the transportation needs of Tier 1 counties discussed in Question 6, above, and as a result, some transportation elements, such as US 158 in northeast NC, were added to the criteria maps and to the STC.

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