Merit Criterion 5 - Quality of Life

I-95 Bridges Merit Criterion 5 Quality of Life - Supplemental Information

NCDOT thanks FHWA for making staff available to provide comments on the I-95 Bridges Bridge Investment Program Grant Application. Based on their input, NCDOT is providing the following supplemental information with regards to Merit Criterion 5. NCDOT has developed a website that includes references and other supplemental information: I-95 Bridges

The Mountains-to-Sea Trail stretches 1,175 miles from the mountains of North Carolina to the Outer Banks. Approximately 40 percent of North Carolinians have local access to the multi-use trail linking state parks and offering opportunities for regional hiking, paddling, and biking.

Coordination for the trail began in January 2018 with North Carolina State Parks on future plans for the Mountains-to-Sea Trail. In the November 2018 Community Impacts Assessment, the trail was identified as a Section 4(f) resource and coordination with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation (NCDPR) was recommended to evaluate potential impacts. This coordination occurred in July 2019 between NCDOT, NCDPR, FHWA, and East Coast Greenway. The agencies concluded that the best option would be to continue collaboration and accommodation of a greenway in the project design. The Categorial Exclusion documentation from June 2020 includes the project's commitments to coordinate with NCDPR regarding the location of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail. In October of 2021, the Integrated Mobility Division reviewed the project and concurred with plans to accommodate the trail under I-95 along the Neuse River. Appendix A can be referenced for further details, key areas are highlighted in yellow.

Data is lacking on overall usage of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail because the 1,175-mile route combines backcountry wilderness paths, state park sections, city greenways, and public road connections rather than a single gated entrance. However, it should be noted that the trails are maintained by a network of 670 to 1,000 volunteers. In 2025, trail volunteers provided more than 41,000 hours of labor to maintain the trail.

Currently, users of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail must cross I-95 by traveling on multiple roads that lack sidewalks. The trail route over I-95 and the CSX Railroad (Figure 1) has a four-foot shoulder and no protective screening. It continues along US 301, a facility that also lacks sidewalks. From 2010 to 2022, there were 9 reported crashes involving bicyclists or pedestrians on US 301 from the crossing of I-95 to the Neuse River, as shown in Figure 2. The proposed route would allow pedestrians and bicyclists to avoid the existing I-95 crossing and portions of US 301 that lack sidewalks and have documented bicycle- and pedestrian-involved crashes.



Figure 1. Current Mountains-to-Sea Trail Crossing of I-95

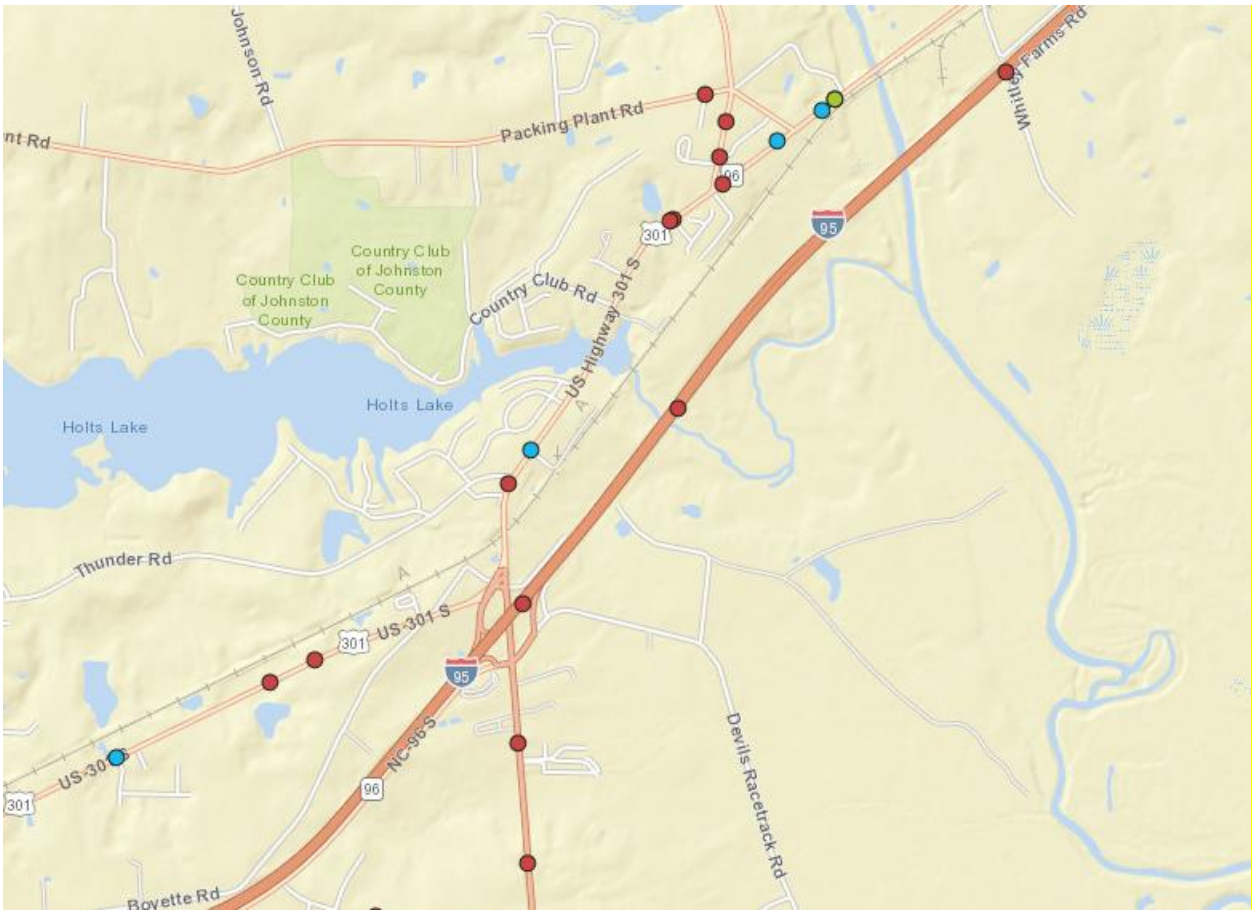


Figure 2. NCDOT Reported Crash Data

In addition to the portion of the greenway on land, the Mountains-to-Sea Trail includes a designated paddle trail route along the Neuse River, originating at a public boat launch in Smithfield and traveling 170 miles to Havelock (Figure 3). Currently, debris gets stuck in the piers of the bridge over the Neuse River, creating blockages for paddlers (Figure 4). The design of the project's bridge reduces the number of piers, reducing the opportunity for debris to accumulate. Each of the current six-span structures has 4 sets of 6 piers in the river, spaced 50 feet apart. These bridges will be replaced with a single structure with 2 rows of piers in the channel. This will provide a wider, 90-foot, safer channel for paddlers. By improving the navigability along the existing Neuse River Paddle Trail, the project will preserve and enhance a recognized active transportation corridor.

While exact estimates of the number of users are not available, this portion of the Neuse River Paddle Trail is supported by local outfitters including Two Sisters Adventure, which offers self-guided expedition packages from Smithfield to Croatan National Forest.

Not only will the reduction of obstructions enhance accessibility for trail users navigating the waterway and overall improve the quality of the experience, accessibility to the Neuse River boat landing is also of critical importance as Smithfield, just upstream of the I-95 bridges of the Neuse River, is the last large town with medical or food facilities downstream until a paddler reaches Goldsboro, which is almost 50 river miles (RM) away. The Smithfield boat ramp is less than 1 mile from the Smithfield UNC Health hospital on N. 8th St. This hospital includes an emergency room facility. There are multiple pharmacies in the vicinity of the hospital, including Realo Discount Drugs and a Walgreens pharmacy. The ramp is 0.3 mile from a US Post office on Bridge Street, 0.3 mile from a Wells Fargo Bank on US 70, and less than 0.4 mile from multiple restaurants and the Ava Gardner Museum. It is approximately 0.5 mile from Smithfield Fire and Rescue on S. 4th Street. The boat landing is less than 0.6 mile from St. Paul's Church and First Presbyterian Church on Church St. There are no publicly accessible boat landings between the I-95 bridges and Richardson's Bridge, as shown in the following map https://www.ncpaws.org/ncwrcmaps/BoatingAccessAreas.

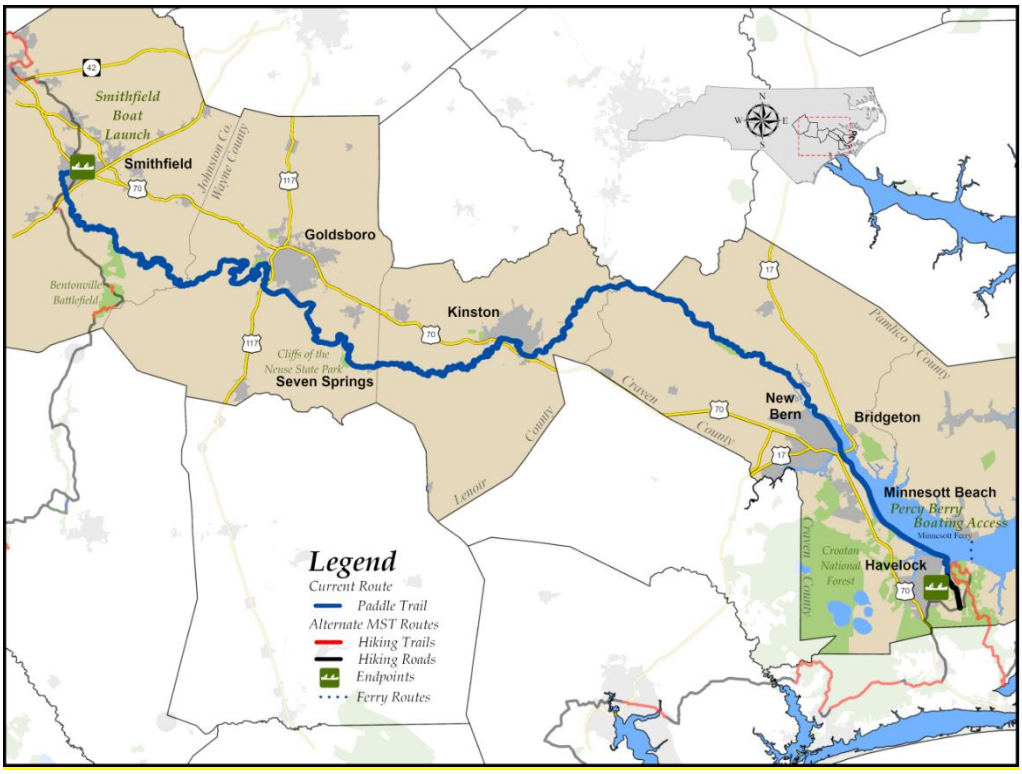


Figure 3. Mountains-to-Sea Paddle Trail route.



Figure 4. Debris accumulation in the Neuse River.

NCDOT thanks FHWA for this opportunity to provide additional information and requests your strong consideration of this application.