



## City of Asheville Comments to NCDOT Proposed Project: Merrimon Avenue (U-5781 & U-5782)

**Summary.** Merrimon Avenue is a traditional road and city connector that is the gateway to the North Asheville community. The proposed NCDOT project to convert a section of Merrimon Avenue (WT Weaver Blvd/Edgewood Rd) from a four- to a five- lane road in order to primarily accommodate automobiles would increase traffic volumes that would likely increase the number of auto-related crashes and degrade the built environment that is a significant retail corridor. The proposed project would not provide sufficient infrastructure for bicycles and pedestrians, which is integral to both city and state multimodal goals. The proposed project would not improve safety for all users. The City of Asheville cannot support a plan that fails to meet city and state goals, and requests the NCDOT to revise the plan to provide one that safely accommodates all users, especially those most vulnerable. We request a design that improves safety, provides viable options to enhance mobility, and a design that enhances the adjacent land uses and traditional shopping corridor; these factors should be weighted more than a design for free flowing automobiles. It is important that collaboration between the City and NCDOT be established quickly to expeditiously make the necessary changes to develop several options that meet our mutual goals and policies.

**Background.** Merrimon Avenue is also known as US25, a road that is classified as a minor arterial that connects Downtown Asheville to Weaverville, running through some of Asheville's oldest neighborhoods. Merrimon Avenues is a traditional road and city connector that passes through vital City residential neighborhoods and business areas. It is the gateway to Asheville neighborhoods to the north and to the University of North Carolina, and the Asheville Central Business District to the south. In Downtown Asheville, Broadway Street, a two-lane road, transitions into Merrimon Avenue north of I-240 and becomes a four-lane road for three miles until it transitions back to a two lane road at the point that Merrimon Avenue reaches Beaver Lake. The NCDOT proposed project primarily aims to improve traffic operations at two intersections along Merrimon Avenue at WT Weaver and Edgewood Road, and these intersections were identified concerns that received funding and were put into the statewide plan, the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP), for right-of-way acquisition in 2018 and for construction in 2019.

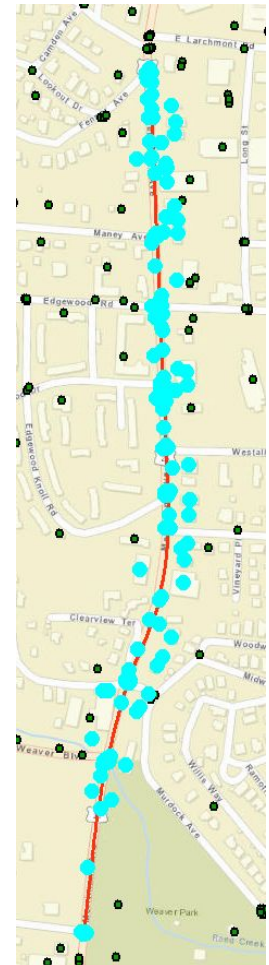
Asheville has changed significantly since early Merrimon Avenue discussions occurred about 20 years ago. Since the [1999 feasibility study](#) there have been changes in policy, transportation planning standards, and local politics. In 2009, a [Community Characteristics Report](#) developed for NCDOT recommended that a future project needed to coordinate with the community to mitigate potential impacts on the historic character of the neighborhood. In 2012, the city adopted a [Complete Streets Policy](#), which directs projects to incorporate active transportation options, reduce vehicle miles traveled and the associated carbon emissions, and calls for better integration of transportation and land use, now recognizing the important nexus between street operations and economic development (NCDOT adopted their own Complete Streets policy in 2009). In 2016 the city adopted the Asheville in Motion (AIM) Plan, which calls for reducing automobile speeds in the city, adding bicycle facilities on Merrimon, and enhancing transit service on Merrimon.

The current proposed design by NCDOT is the wrong solution for the problem as it has been shown that road widenings induce demand and, over time, eliminate the automobile level of service (LOS) improvements that are initially gained, thereby perpetuating and contributing to a larger problem. Most important, however, we have realized that road widenings primarily benefit automobiles at the expense of pedestrians, bicyclists, and the built

environment. Changing Merrimon to make it look and feel like Tunnel Road or Leicester highway is not be the best fit for this corridor or for Asheville.

**Key to this community conversation is an understanding that motor vehicle LOS is only one indicator for the health of street.** Other important factors include safety, mobility, and the effect on property and urban design.

- **Safety.** Between 2006-2017, this stretch of Merrimon Avenue had over 600 recorded crash incidents, including at least two with disabling injuries (see image to the right). In 2015, a 67-year-old woman was killed when trying to cross Merrimon Avenue one block south of the project area. On average, there is one auto-related crash along this half mile every week. The final design should improve safety for all users, especially for the most vulnerable.
- **Mobility options.** Currently Merrimon Avenue lacks appropriate pedestrian and bicycle facilities. Although the proposed project incorporates a 5' sidewalk and allows for bicyclists to share the road, national standards (NACTO) recommend that shared roads are not appropriate on streets with design speeds above 25 mph--the proposed design speed is 40 mph. Safety concerns are both real and perceived. A 5-foot wide sidewalk along a five-lane road with no buffer from the street and immediately adjacent to a 13' moving lane is intimidating and uninviting. In addition, the numerous existing utility poles in the middle of sidewalks are an impediment to handicapped-accessible pedestrian travel.
- **Effect on property & urban design.** Five lane roads such as Tunnel Road, Leicester Highway, and Hendersonville Road are suburban, auto-oriented designs. They primarily serve to accommodate automobiles. Yet in urban environments wide roads without street trees significantly degrade the neighborhood and the pedestrian experience. Wider five-lane roads have fewer street trees because NCDOT requires that street trees be set back from moving vehicles, effectively eliminating them from many projects, as proposed for Merrimon Avenue.



**Alternative Approach.** There is another way forward that has been proven to be successful, even in locations with similar traffic volumes. The ‘road diet’ approach uses the right-of-way more efficiently, seeking to improve automobile LOS as best as possible by removing turning vehicles from the moving lanes with dedicated turn lanes and making improvements to control driveway access ([This map](#) notes seven driveways that require further investigation to determine if they are redundant and/or excessive, and whether their removal could improve traffic operations and safety while still maintaining necessary access for business.) The [FHWA guidance](#) states that road diets are recommended for volumes below an Average Daily Traffic (ADT) of 20,000, and may be appropriate for higher-volume streets. For instance, the maximum acceptable volume for a road diet in Seattle, WA is 25,000 ADT. See [this map](#) for a review of the current ADT along the Merrimon Avenue corridor. The following are a few comparable road diet case studies:

Project Location	ADT	Resulting Road Diet Benefits
<a href="#">Ocean Park Blvd (pg 18), Santa Monica, CA</a>	23,000	Crashes reduced 65%
<a href="#">East Blvd (pg 4), Charlotte, NC</a>	20,000	Crashes reduced 20-100%*
<a href="#">La Jolla Blvd, San Diego, CA</a>	23,000	Crashes reduced 90%; Retail sales up 30%

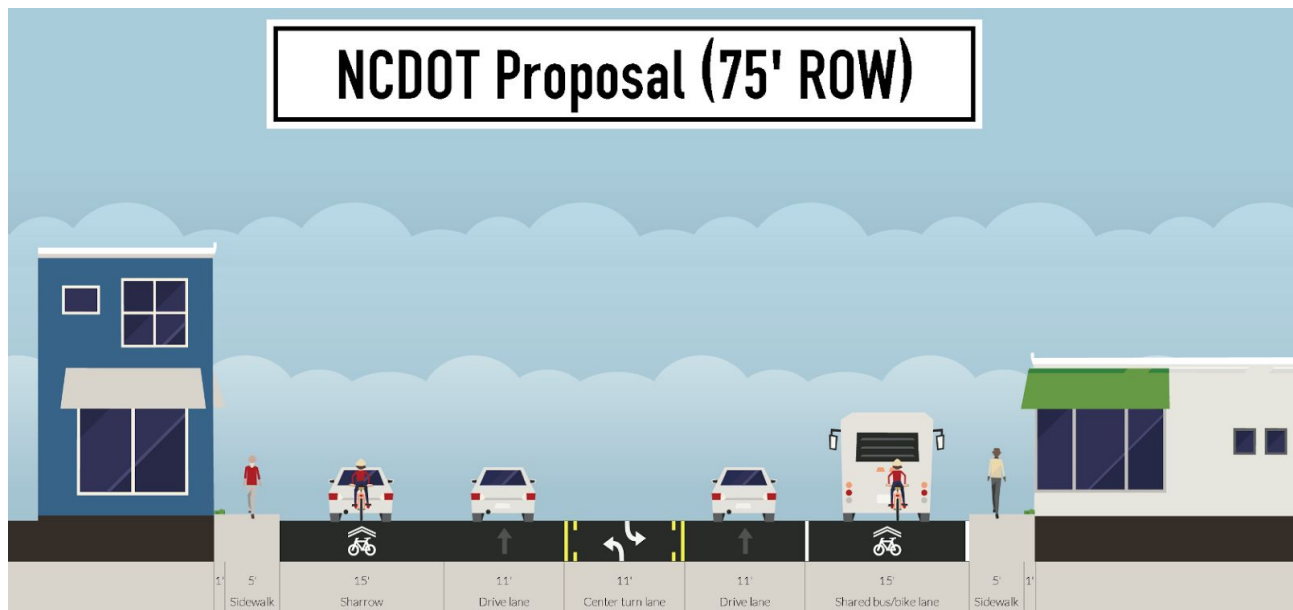
\* Some rear end crashes increased

Aside from ADT, road diet analysis depends on peak volumes, directionality, and other factors that together define the expected automotive LOS. These factors need to be analyzed and reviewed so that we can understand

potential impacts on automobile transport to then weigh them against the benefits that come along with safety enhancements, improved mobility, and a better urban design.

**Consideration of City Council Vision, Goals, and Approved Plans:** Asheville's [City Council Vision](#) points to a city with pedestrian oriented development that harmonizes with the transportation system where it is easy to get around without a car safely. The Asheville City Development Plan 2025 (or Comprehensive Plan) identifies Merrimon Avenue as an Urban/Neighborhood Corridor where sidewalks, streetscape and building design acknowledge and provide a safe environment for the pedestrian users of the corridor. The [Comprehensive Plan update](#) highlights the importance of transit-supportive corridors that support walkability, bicycling, and ease of getting around.

In order to accomplish these goals, staff must seek designs that align with them. In the case of Merrimon Avenue, an alternative design could be one that slows vehicles such that through-traffic chooses instead to travel along I-26; where bicyclists travel in a protected lane that safety connects to the Glenn's Creek Greenway; where pedestrians have wider sidewalks buffered with street trees; where an improved streetscape raises the level of the shopping corridor to make it a place that is exciting to visit--where taking a stroll is safe and pleasant. The concepts below compare cross sections of the NCDOT proposed design with an alternative concept, and one that shows a road diet design within the existing right-of-way.



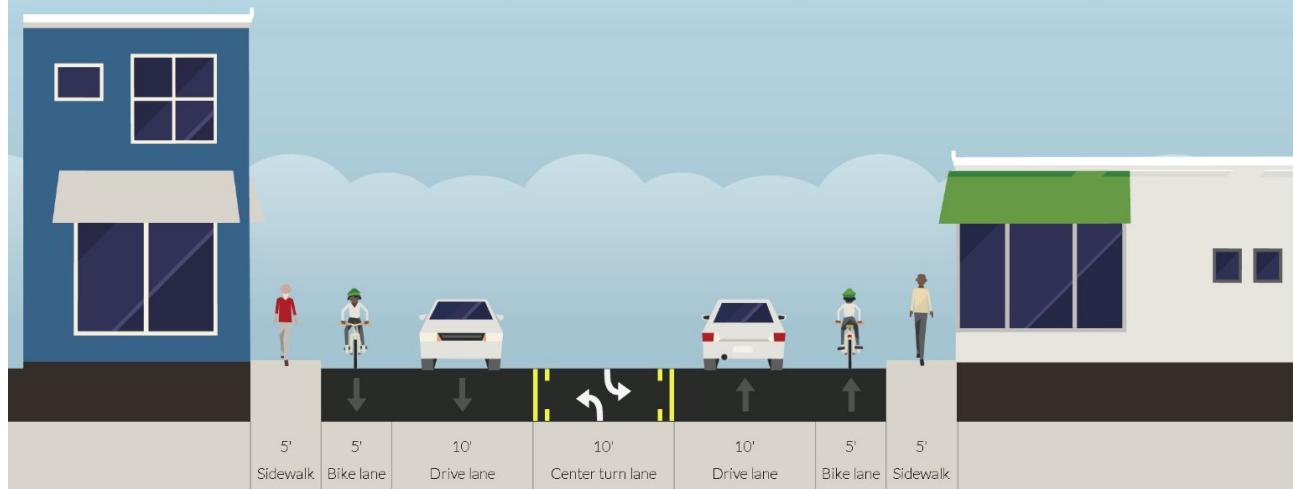
(The 15 foot curbside lanes include two-foot-wide gutter pans.)

## Alternative Concept (69' ROW)



(The seven foot curbside bike lanes include two-foot-wide gutter pans; the bus lane would be for all cars.)

## Within Existing Footprint (50' ROW)



(The five foot curbside bike lanes include two-foot-wide gutter pans. The width of the street at the northernmost section is approximately 48 feet, which would provide additional space for bicycles. Sidewalks would be lacking along portions in this Existing-Footprint scenario but could be built in a later phase.)

Primary benefits include the following:

1. Reduced speeds and crashes, saving citizens from property damage and potentially saving lives
2. A more equitable design that supports transport options (protected bicycle and sidewalk facilities)
3. Shorter crossing distances for pedestrians, especially vulnerable populations (young, old, disabled)
4. Space for transit vehicles to move out of the moving lane when stopping
5. A smaller overall footprint, less property acquisition
6. [Improved service for emergency responders](#), according to the Federal Highway Administration.
7. A design that aligns with City Council Vision, the City Comprehensive Plan, the Asheville in Motion (AIM) Mobility Plan<sup>1</sup>, and the Comprehensive Bicycle Plan of 2008, which also aligns with NCDOT's [Complete Streets Policy](#) and [Vision Zero Resolution](#).

Other benefits include:

- NCDOT has recently adopted safety performance measures in the Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP) to reduce fatal and serious injuries by 5% on a five year average. Research shows that four-to-three lane road diets reduce speeds and crash rates. The alternative concept would help NCDOT achieve its safety targets.
- The Land of Sky MPO's [Clean Cities Coalition](#) and regional planning efforts seek to reduce vehicle miles traveled (VMT) that this alternative concept would likely achieve as more local trips would shift to transit, bicycling, and walking.
- Merrimon Avenue is a vital commuter corridor, but it is also a hub of local business and a common connector between neighborhoods, schools, a university and recreation centers. The Go Mountain Transportation Demand Management (TDM) program seeks to increase trips by alternative modes and reduce vehicle miles traveled along this corridor. To do this, de-emphasizing roadway vehicle volumes are recommended to facilities for active commuting and transit users. Peak hour congestion cannot be fully mitigated in a constrained corridor such as Merrimon Ave, while also providing for safe travel by all modes and safe vehicular speeds at off-peak hours. Instead, the TDM program joins the stated guidance of the French Broad River Metropolitan Planning Organization in their Congestion Management Process (CMP) Appendix F, Page 14, for a relaxed level of service for vehicular traffic on a Matured Management Corridor. "Congestion may be acceptable along these corridors or at intersections to encourage walkability and livability and could include: relaxed LOS standards. Methods for addressing congestion include: increased transit services; ITS; ped-bike improvements; requirements of new or infill development, including TDM.
- The city's [Transit Master Plan](#) is currently underway and will likely see improved north/south transit service along Merrimon Avenue that would help to provide additional mobility to potentially further reduce VMT along this corridor.
- It has been shown<sup>2</sup> that attractive streets have vertical to horizontal ratios of about 1:2 (street is twice as wide as buildings are tall), and that wider streets are only successful if they have street trees to provide definition and a better sense of pedestrian scale. The Merrimon Avenue section is about 1:4 and so street trees are important if the corridor is to attract more visitors and shoppers. A reduced design speed and buffered bicycle facilities of the alternative concept would likely provide the necessary clear zone space required by NCDOT to allow for street trees to be incorporated into the design.

It is understandable that NCDOT may not be interested in the alternative concept if it fails to improve the automotive LOS because conventional transportation planning does not fully account for the other needs and benefits that a street can provide, that a road diet may lead to unaccounted for auto congestion and that that possibility is enough to drop the project. In other words, the thinking goes that by not being able to identify, in advance, where modeled spillover traffic may go, that it is enough to forgo a project that would provide multiple city and state benefits that may actually accommodate cars sufficiently, as has been shown to be the case in the earlier case studies.

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<sup>1</sup> AIM identifies that Merrimon Avenue should have lower travel speeds and traffic volumes where pedestrians and cyclists navigate to visit businesses, and that more people accessing businesses by bike or foot could translate to less parking requirements for the business owners.

<sup>2</sup> Jacobs, Allan B. *Great Streets*, MIT Press, 1993, pg. 279.

If Asheville is to move in the direction of the vision set by city council and to achieve the many goals related to multimodal transportation and quality of life for Ashevilleians, we need to consider more than automobile LOS in this project. Inconvenient automobile congestion during peak travels times need not dominate the conversation because automobiles, although significant, are only part of the puzzle. This project can balance the automotive needs and also improve safety, enhance the pedestrian experience, provide a safe alternative for bicyclists, and support the existing urban land uses with streetscape improvements, potentially adding benches and pedestrian-scale lighting along wider sidewalks that include street trees. Improving the environment to make it more attractive for business should be a key element of the design.

It is our responsibility to make the case very clear that both city and state goals call for multimodal designs that improve safety. An alternative concept is possible if we can agree to accept a reduced automobile LOS in exchange for improved safety, mobility, and a higher-quality urban design. Asheville looks forward to collaborating with NCDOT and the design team to revise the plan to develop alternatives that align with city goals and adopted plans and that safely accommodate all users, especially those most vulnerable, and to stay on schedule.

\*In addition to this document, we have prepared a list of line-item [detailed comments](#) that include staff comments as well as those submitted to staff from the public and from Asheville's Multimodal Transportation Commission (MMTC).