

Passenger Rail Task Force

RALEIGH CITY COUNCIL

March 21, 2011

Mayor Charles Meeker
Raleigh City Council
Raleigh, North Carolina

Dear Mayor Meeker and Councilors:

The Passenger Rail Task Force respectfully submits the following resolution:

WHEREAS, the Passenger Rail Task Force (PRTF) was directed by the Raleigh City Council to evaluate possible closures of rail crossings in West Raleigh and impacts on Transit Oriented Development planning;

WHEREAS, the PRTF discussed this deliverable at length during the course of its January 18 and February 25, 2011 meetings;

WHEREAS, PRTF members conducted a two-hour, in-depth bus tour of the entire West Raleigh rail corridor from the Boylan Wye to the Raleigh city limits at I-40, accompanied by Eric Lamb and Roberta Fox of the Raleigh Planning Department, including stops and discussions in these areas:

- North and south of the rail corridor at Corporate Center Drive and Bashford;
- North and South of the rail line where Edwards Mill Road is planned to traverse the North Carolina Railroad Company (NCRR) corridor;
- North and south sides of the at-grade intersection of Nowell Drive;
- The areas adjacent to the intersection of Hillsborough Street and Western Boulevard where Jones Franklin Road might one day be extended north of the railroad (so-called “Dysfunction Junction”);
- The existing Hillsborough Street railroad underpass;
- North and south sides of the at-grade intersection of Powell Drive (Burke Brothers Hardware is located on the northeast side of this crossing);
- Blue Ridge Road intersection (grade separation project underway);
- The existing I-440 bridge over the NCRR corridor;
- The at-grade intersection of Beryl Road;
- Beryl Road where it might be extended east to connect to Royal Street;
- North and south sides of the at-grade intersection of Royal Street;
- The neighborhood street grid between Royal and Gorman on the south side of the rail tracks; and
- North and south sides of the existing Gorman Street bridge.

The existing bridges over the rail corridor at Dan Allen, Pullen, and Ashe were also discussed, as was a possible future bridge over the rail tracks at West Morgan (the Blair-Hunt-Morgan Connector project);

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WHEREAS, a PRTF Co-chair attended the CAMPO meeting held January 26, 2011, the subject of which was to determine whether rail-highway grade separation projects in West Raleigh, Cary, and Morrisville should be prioritized and recommended for funding together or separately by individual city;

WHEREAS, at the invitation of Patrick Simmons, Director of NCDOT-Rail Division, a PRTF Co-chair attended a presentation by Paul Worley of the NCDOT-Rail Division on February 3, 2011 to learn about and to understand crossing safety grade separation projects, including Traffic Separation Studies that provide objective data for prioritizing and authorizing funds for crossing safety projects, including but not limited to at-grade crossing improvements and/or closure, alternate access, and grade separation projects;

WHEREAS, the 1999 operating agreement between the North Carolina Railroad (NCR, lessor) and the Norfolk Southern Railway (NS, lessee) limits all trains running over the NCR corridor to a maximum speed of 90 MPH, including passenger trains operating between Raleigh and Charlotte;

WHEREAS, the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) requires impenetrable barriers, closing or grade-separating all rail-highway at-grade crossings in passenger train corridors, including High Speed Rail (HSR), in which trains will operate above 110 MPH (<http://www.fra.dot.gov/Pages/217.shtml>);

WHEREAS, Federal and State transportation policies encourage the consolidation and elimination of at-grade crossings considering that while at-grade crossing devices warn, they cannot necessarily protect motorists;

WHEREAS, rail-highway at-grade intersections may remain open since passenger trains will not operate over 90 MPH in the NCR corridor between Raleigh and Charlotte and are not therefore subject to the FRA mandate;

WHEREAS, even without a regulatory requirement to close West Raleigh rail-highway at-grade crossings, the PRTF recognizes the moral imperative to ensure public safety in HSR corridors by either closing or grade-separating all rail crossings at grade;

WHEREAS, existing West Raleigh grade separations at Ashe, Pullen, Dan Allen, Gorman, I-440, Hillsborough, and I-40 are considered essential and will remain important north-south connectors across the rail corridor;

WHEREAS, the Blue Ridge grade separation project (TIP Project U-4437), highway under railroad alternative, is believed to be essential to enable Transit-Oriented Development project opportunities adjacent to the nearby Fairgrounds TTA rail transit station and is an important north-south connector across the rail corridor;

WHEREAS, future possible West Raleigh grade separation projects fall into two groups:

- Four existing rail-highway at-grade crossings (Royal, Beryl, Powell, and Nowell); and
- Potential new crossings of the railroad (including, but not limited to, Jones Franklin, Edwards Mill, and the Corporate Center Drive/Bashford area);

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WHEREAS, the PRTF is informed of strong neighborhood and community desire to maintain local street connectivity for pedestrians, bicyclists, and vehicular traffic at existing rail-highway at-grade crossings (Royal, Beryl, Powell, and Nowell), whether by grade separating those intersections, providing improved alternate access, or by constructing nearby equivalent at-grade crossings that include safe pedestrian accommodations;

WHEREAS, if equivalent local street connectivity solutions are developed to replace Royal, Beryl, Powell, and/or Nowell, the PRTF is sensitive to the need for the alternative access to be at least as convenient and accessible as the streets they replace and scaled appropriately to the streets they replace, and that thoroughfare and heavy collector streets such as Gorman, Blue Ridge, and proposed Edwards Mill Extension are not in these respects equivalent connector solutions to closing Royal, Beryl, Powell, and/or Nowell;

WHEREAS, the PRTF believes that a comprehensive, systematic, well-planned-and-executed public outreach program, including public listening sessions, is essential to better understand the desire of neighborhoods adjacent to the rail crossings and of the greater community who use and depend upon the rail crossings as part of a Traffic Separation or other study exercise before making final decisions to leave open, to close, or to build equivalent new West Raleigh crossings of the NCRR corridor;

WHEREAS, the City of Raleigh is working with CAMPO to develop a study which would include monies to fund public listening sessions later in 2011 which could be attended by the PRTF and prove an important foundation for the upcoming Traffic Separation Study;

WHEREAS, the task force understands that north-south connectivity over the rail corridor is highly desired to be maintained at distance intervals not greater than a half mile to assure opportunities for bicycle and pedestrian connectivity and for economic development, with an emphasis on Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) projects within a quarter mile radius of rail public transit stations;

WHEREAS, traffic count data for the existing rail-highway at-grade crossings are:

- Royal Street – 942 in 2007;
- Beryl Road – 8,614 in 2007 (2009 traffic volume map for City of Raleigh shows 5,000);
- Powell Drive – 2,300 in 2005 (rounded) (2009 traffic volume map for City of Raleigh shows 2,500 at count station south of Carolina Avenue);
- Nowell Road – 3,150 in 2005 (rounded) (2009 traffic volume map for City of Raleigh shows 3,500 at the intersection with Germantown Road);
- Blue Ridge Road – approximately 19,000 (a dramatically different scale from the above four)

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the Passenger Rail Task Force believes that these principles should be adopted to guide the City Council in making decisions about West Raleigh grade separation projects:

- Economic growth is spurred by good access to interconnected transportation networks, including railways, highways, bicycle lanes, and pedestrian walkways;
- Safe, convenient, and walkable interconnectivity should be maintained in order to encourage

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opportunities for economic development in the areas both north and south of the rail corridor and to encourage TOD projects adjacent to stations along the West Raleigh rail line;

- Narrow, calm, and walkable streets with multiple outlets to traverse a community minimize congestion and are essential to Raleigh's long-term future growth and high quality of life;
- A fine grain, walkable grid network of local connector roads with pedestrian accommodations such as Royal, Beryl, Powell, and Nowell, or their equivalent, which safely cross the tracks at locations convenient for local neighborhood and event traffic should be maintained;
- Thoroughfares such as Blue Ridge and Edwards Mill and parallel collectors such as Beryl and Hillsborough are not equivalent substitutes to local connector roads across the rail corridor;
- Increasing connectivity by constructing new grade separations where none presently cross rail lines in West Raleigh (including, but not limited to, Jones Franklin, Edwards Mill, and vicinity of Corporate Center Drive-Bashford) will encourage nearby economic development;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Passenger Rail Task Force, recommends that:

- A comprehensive, systematic, public outreach program, including public listening sessions, be planned and executed as soon as feasible and be completed not later than the end of 2011;
- The City of Raleigh, CAMPO, and NCDOT-Rail Division partner to develop such a public outreach program;
- The task force be directed to attend the public sessions, as member schedules allow, and to report to the City Council on the results of the sessions;
- The City of Raleigh, CAMPO, and NCDOT-Rail Division partner to conduct Traffic Separation Studies (TSS), including new vehicle traffic counts, at each of the existing at-grade rail crossings (Royal, Beryl, Powell, and Nowell), and estimated pedestrian use to provide objective data;
- In order to provide comprehensive and objective data to analyze existing rail crossings (Royal, Beryl, Powell, Hillsborough, and Nowell) and potential new crossings, the TSS use new peak hour and special event vehicle and pedestrian counts in conjunction with computer modeling projections of peak hour and special event traffic and pedestrian counts based on:
 - Future TOD maximum density build-outs at the proposed Gorman, Blue Ridge, Jones Franklin, and West Raleigh transit stations,
 - Build-out densities currently being proposed in the most current master plans for N.C. State Fairgrounds, Meredith College, N.C. Museum of Art, NCSU, and other state-owned properties north of the rail corridor, and
 - Recommended Southwest Raleigh densities in the 2030 Future Land Use Map on both sides of the rail corridor;
- TSS partnership methodology for prospective West Raleigh grade separation projects be expanded to include holistic analysis of factors such as:

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- Residential neighborhood and commercial area contexts and impacts,
 - Multi-modal impacts (rail, bus, bicycle, and pedestrian traffic),
 - Street grid network standards that adhere to nationally-recognized urban and TOD best practices for multi-modal (transit, vehicle, bicycle, and pedestrian) fluidity and rapid emergency (fire, police, and EMS) response time,
 - Walkability measured using criteria equally weighted to vehicular traffic, and
 - The types of grade separation (overpass or underpass) specified by FHWA and FRA policies and allowed or preferred by NCRP (rail corridor owner);
- Decisions to close, to keep open, or to develop equivalent replacement connectivity for the at-grade rail crossings at Royal, Beryl, Powell, and Nowell be delayed until the results of the public listening sessions have been reported and the Traffic Separation Study is complete;
 - Decisions to proceed with grade separation projects at potential new crossings be delayed until the results of the public listening sessions have been reported and the Traffic Separation Study is complete;
 - CAMPO be tasked with developing a prioritization of West Raleigh grade separation projects in conjunction with those of Cary and Morrisville, to be guided in part by the results of the Traffic Separation Study, with the understanding that Raleigh will decide which crossings it wishes to pursue for grade separation projects;
 - The City of Raleigh's and CAMPO's methods and guidelines for prioritization shall not conflict with the principles stated above; and
 - The City Council make final decisions about which West Raleigh crossings it wishes to pursue for grade separation projects in accord with the principles stated above after reviewing reports from the PRTF on the public outreach sessions and after reviewing detailed data analysis summaries derived from the joint Raleigh/CAMPO/NCDOT-Rail Traffic Separation Study, CAMPO prioritization of grade separation projects, and in accord with documented Federal, State, and railroad policies and procedures.

Sincerely,

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