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Route 5 Study Underway

By Tom Lappas, Henrico Citizen Editor • Thu, Aug 05, 2010

The future of the Route 5 corridor began to take shape last month at Varina High School.

There, about 200 people attended a public information meeting to offer their opinions about traffic problems and transportation solutions along the seven-mile stretch of Route 5 from 7th Street in the city to Laburnum Avenue in Henrico. They also offered suggestions about what types of pedestrian and bicycle paths and road expansion plans they would like to see as part of the eventual growth of the corridor.

The meeting, hosted by Kimley-Horn and Associates, Inc. on behalf of the Richmond Regional Planning District Commission, was one of the first steps in an 18-month study of the Route 5 corridor by six entities. The study – a partnership between Henrico, Richmond, VDOT, the GRTC Transit System, the RRPDC and the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation – is designed to create a long-range master plan for a corridor that encompasses urban, suburban and rural areas – and one that will witness much growth in the coming years. Officials hope to establish plans for a variety of transportation options – from pedestrian paths to bus rapid transit service, bicycles and automobiles.

Planners envision the corridor becoming a friendly stretch for walkers, joggers and cyclists, among others.

"We're starting with a blank slate," RRPDC Principal Planner Lee Yolton told those in attendance. "We're looking for your vision. There is going to be a lot of future development. We want to try to get ahead of the curve."

In addition to the continuing growth of Rocketts Landing, located on the city-county line, the corridor will feel a significant impact from the development of Tree Hill Farm, just a mile or so east of Rocketts Landing. That project hasn't yet started but is expected ultimately to produce as many as 2,800 residences and 1.16 million square feet of office space. Farther east, near the Pocahontas Parkway, another huge mixed-use development – Wilton on the James – will bring another 3,200 homes and a town center for office and commercial space.

Some attendees complained about rush-hour traffic – particularly in the morning, when it can be difficult to enter Route 5 from feeder roads because of the steady parade of traffic.

Varina resident Ron Roane said he worries when he sees cyclists and pedestrians making their way along Route 5 on stretches where there are no shoulders. He's like to see the road widened, or turning lanes added, to alleviate some of the most congested intersections.

Varina resident Nicole Anderson Ellis would prefer that the road not be widened but that sidewalks with physical barriers be erected to provide a safe place for cyclists and walkers, while maintaining the historical nature of Route 5 (which is designed a Virginia Scenic Byway).

Resident Jeanne McNeil was lukewarm about the idea of widening Route 5, saying it was important to preserve the road's rural character but also important to create a separate path for walkers and cyclists.

"People have to be really steady bike riders" to use Route 5 in its current form, she said.

Another resident, Charles Hoover, said he's already witnessed three serious auto accidents near his home on Route 5 in the past year but doesn't want to see major changes to Route 5 that could threaten the region's rural environment.

Local residents Carlton Marshall and Tom Flynn both said they would worry

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about a bottleneck effect if portions of Route 5 were widened and others weren't.

Kimley-Horn planner Carl Tewksbury told the Citizen that the corridor presented unique challenges and opportunities because of how quickly it transcends several types of areas and, potentially, several modes of transportation.

"We're understanding more about how to accommodate all modes," he said. "It's really important how we transition from urban to rural."

As part of the study, officials already have conducted traffic counts along the entire corridor and rated (on a scale of "A" to "F") each intersection's ability to handle traffic during morning and evening rush-hour commutes. The Williamsburg Avenue intersection rated the worst during morning traffic (rating at the "D" level) but rated closer to the "A/B" level during afternoon commutes.

Capital Trail Discussed

Much of the discussion among those who attended the forum centered around plans for the 54-mile Virginia Capital Trail, a state project funded primarily by federal dollars that will connect Williamsburg with Richmond and provide a path for bikers, walkers, skaters and other forms of non-automobile transportation.

The trail mostly will follow Route 5 and primarily be separated from the road. But a feasibility study conducted for VDOT by a consultant in the late 1990s recommended that most of the 9.5-mile Henrico portion of the trail be connected to the road as a wide shoulder or bike lane. That recommendation was made, according to Capital Trail Project Manager Ian Millikan of VDOT, because officials believed it could be difficult to obtain right of way from property owners to build the trail separately.

Several bicycle enthusiasts who attended the meeting urged anyone who would listen to support a plan for a separate path. Bud Vye, the advocacy chairman for the Richmond Area Bicycling Association, said that attaching the trail to Route 5 would be a mistake.

"We just don't want our segment to be the only standard one – and it will be if this goes through like this," Vye said.

The organization's members are primarily those who enjoy riding recreationally and not competitively, Vye said. Many are hesitant to bike along Route 5 now because of the high speed limits and lack of shoulders or bike lanes. Creating a separate path off the road would open the historic corridor to many more people, he said.

Thomas Bowden, an attorney and chairman of Bike Walk Virginia's advocacy committee, agreed. Making the entire trail separate from the road would create a more user-friendly path that could serve as a strong tourist attraction, he said. But "it won't get use if it's disjointed," he said.

Though last month's meeting sought input about the entire corridor – including thoughts and ideas about what form the trail should take – the event was not connected to trail project itself, which is being completed separately by VDOT. VDOT intends to hold a public information session specifically to solicit input about the Varina portion of the trail (from the Richmond city line to Long Bridge Road) later this year or in early 2011, Millikan said. The agency could make changes to its plans for the trail's location afterwards, he said. (Details about the trail can be viewed online at www.virginiadot.org/projects/newcaptrail_welcome.)

asp). Construction of the Varina portion is expected to cost between \$8 million and \$9 million.

About 14 miles of the trail near Williamsburg are currently open; the entire trail is expected to be completed by 2014 or 2015, Millikan said.

Next Steps

Officials next will conduct an analysis of existing conditions along the corridor, then try to project future conditions and analyze those before developing conceptual plans to address late this year and into early 2011. A concept plan will be issued early next year, Tewksbury said, and then two more concept meetings will be held in March and May. Officials will issue a draft report sometime next summer or fall, he said.

For details about the Route 5 Corridor Study, or to provide input, visit www.Route5Corridor.com.

com.

– Allison Throckmorton contributed to this article.

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