

Give the green light to local I-26 spur design, DOT

Contributed by AC-T Editorial
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We urge the N.C. Department of Transportation to honor Asheville City Council's request to build the Interstate 26 Connector in accordance with a design proposed by the Asheville Design Center and modified by Figg Engineers.

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Council voted 6-1 Tuesday in favor of a resolution that urges DOT to strongly consider the design for the long-delayed connector. The vote followed the presentation of a report from Figg, the firm the city hired to evaluate the Design Center's proposal.

The project is intended to connect sections of Interstate 26 south and north of the city and includes a new bridge over the river.

The report council received Tuesday said that the design, as revised by Figg, appears to accomplish the Design Center's original goals. The only goal that could not be met was the double-decker design for the new bridge. The Figg revision provides for side-by-side bridges.

The Design Center, a nonprofit planning and architecture group, put forward in 2006 an alternative design to the options for the connector presented by DOT. Buncombe County and the City of Asheville partnered to pay for the independent review by Figg after the DOT raised engineering concerns about the Design Center proposal. DOT has indicated it will take two months to review the Figg report.

Less expense, intrusion

The Design Center plan takes up less land and would cost as much as \$150 million less to construct, according to its proponents.

That's a significant amount of the \$363.4 million the state plan is expected to cost in today's dollars.

The Design Center proposal has the added advantage of removing interstate and through-traffic from Smoky Park Bridge so that it can be turned into an urban boulevard connecting West Asheville to downtown.

Besides the savings in cost, the savings in land would provide an opportunity for development and could add significantly to the city's tax base.

The Design Center was created with a \$15,000 grant to the Asheville section of the American Institute of Architects (AIA). The Asheville architects had applied for an AIA "Blueprint for America - AIA 150" grant for a project titled "Bridging the French Broad: Creating Connected Livable Communities."

Local input gathered

The Design Center involved the Asheville community in a discussion of how principles for livable communities could be incorporated into the design for the connector.

The design that emerged modifies one of the four DOT alternatives but it features a more compact footprint.

It would require laying down about half the amount of asphalt as the DOT plans. It would also require far less right-of-way acquisition than the 238 to 273 acres called for in various DOT designs.

One goal the double-decker bridge proposed in the Design Center plan was to provide Asheville with a distinctive "signature" bridge that would be an attraction in itself.

Even though a double-decker bridge may not be an option, that doesn't rule out the prospect of building a unique, one-of-a-kind bridge that will be an enhancement to the city landscape.

This project will be the most significant public works project in Asheville in a generation. It will influence the city's development and city residents' quality of life for at least the next 50 years.

Far-reaching impacts

We have to get it right.

Like the DOT options, the Design Center's proposal would create an efficient corridor for moving interstate traffic through the city. Unlike the DOT options, the Design Center's plan would save taxpayers money, provide more land for development and contribute to a more vibrant, livable city.

The Figg report should remove any engineering concerns the state has and clear the way for moving forward with all due haste.