

**Catoctin Coalition, Journey Through Hallowed Ground, Coalition for Smarter Growth,
Piedmont Environmental Council, Southern Environmental Law Center**

August 31, 2018

Phyllis Randall, Chair
Geary Higgins, Catoctin District Supervisor
Loudoun County Board of Supervisors
1 Harrison Street, S.E., Fifth Floor
P.O. Box 7000
Leesburg, VA 20177-7000

Re: Route 15 north of Leesburg – Recommendation for roundabouts and traffic-calming

Encl:

- 1) *U.S. Highway 15 Roundabout Conceptual Analysis Memo*, Ken Ray, PLA, and Ian Lockwood, PE, Toole Design Group, August 28, 2018
- 2) *Learning from Loudoun's Route 50 Traffic-Calming Project, a National Model*, Ian Lockwood, PE, Toole Design Group, May 24, 2018
- 3) *Route 15 Presentation*, Ian Lockwood, PE, Toole Design Group, June 22, 2018

Dear Chair Randall, Supervisor Higgins, and members of the Board of Supervisors:

On behalf of our respective organizations, we are writing to once again express our strongest possible support for roundabouts and traffic-calming for Route 15 north of Leesburg to the Maryland line as a solution that is safer, more effective, faster to implement, and less expensive than traditional road widening with traffic signals and bypasses.

Following up on the discussion at our June 22 meeting with Supervisor Higgins and his aide, Stacy Carey, Bo Machayo (Chair Randall's Chief of Staff), Val Suzdak (Supervisor Umstadd's aide), county staff, and consultants, we have attached a memo from Toole Design Group (Encl. 1) that analyzes a one-lane roundabout at the Route 15/White's Ferry Road intersection and concludes it is not merely a practical solution, but the optimal one.¹ As explained further below, that conclusion points to the wisdom of thoroughly evaluating a *corridor-wide* approach that combines roundabouts with traffic-calming improvements before proceeding any further with the highway-widening concepts that are currently under evaluation for both the southern stretch of the corridor to Montresor Road, and the section farther north to the Virginia-Maryland border. We recognize that the county has had an outreach process, but not one that has adequately

¹ We have also attached a copy of a report Mr. Lockwood wrote on the benefits of roundabouts and traffic-calming on Route 15 (Encl. 2) that we previously submitted to you in May. In addition, we are providing a copy of the PowerPoint presentation that Mr. Lockwood used during his presentation at that meeting (Encl. 3). For those not in attendance at that meeting, we apologize that the slides do not capture or convey the full extent of Mr. Lockwood's narrative presentation.

explored or evaluated a corridor-length traffic-calming project. We therefore request the County and the Virginia Department of Transportation to engage the community in a visioning and design process along the lines of what we discuss below, with the goal of achieving an informed consensus on a traffic-calming design for Route 15 that strikes the best balance between congestion relief, safety, local access, and historic integrity.

Our strong interest in this corridor is based on its national importance as a National Scenic Byway within a National Heritage Area, rich in historic and scenic assets. Those intrinsic qualities are worthy of preservation not only on their own merits, but also for fueling a vibrant tourism economy that benefits not only Loudoun but the entire region. Closely following the guidance of the Journey Through Hallowed Ground Corridor Management Plan for highway improvements will enhance both Route 15's assets and its function, whereas approaching improvements as if this were just any road would degrade and destroy the qualities that make the corridor a national treasure.

A single-lane roundabout is the best option for the White's Ferry Road Intersection.

Since our June meeting with you, we raised private funding to support consultations with Toole Design regarding the effectiveness of a single-lane roundabout solution for the Route 15/White's Ferry Road intersection. (Note that a one-lane roundabout presumes Route 15 remains one lane in each direction to the north and south of the roundabout.) Their attached report states:

“It is our conclusion that a roundabout is the best option for this intersection and a single-lane roundabout will be adequate for current and 2020 volumes. As the prior consulting study shows, a roundabout performs better operationally than the signalized intersection because it allows for the free-flowing movement of traffic through the roundabout compared to the stop and go platoons of vehicles processed through the signal.”²

In addition to its effectiveness from a traffic-flow standpoint, we believe that the construction cost for the roundabout will likely be substantially less than what county staff and the county consultants have estimated, and the roundabout's lifecycle cost should be far less than that of a traffic signal. The \$8 million roundabout cost cited by county staff was for a two-lane roundabout, which is a larger design and may necessitate some right-of-way acquisition that is not required for a single-lane roundabout. Notably, VDOT has a cost comparison guide³ for roundabouts and intersections which takes into account both the initial construction expense and their cost over time. VDOT's tool estimates the cost of a new signal at \$600,000 and a new roundabout at \$1 million. However, the maintenance costs are negligible for the roundabout, and the reduction in crashes and resulting savings in human life, property damage, and emergency response costs, result in the roundabout being much less expensive than the signal over the lifetime of the project.

² Toole Design utilized current and near-term projections because further review, including information on travel origins and destinations, is needed for the longer-term projections. Moreover, using roundabouts and two-lane traffic-calming will set an “environmental capacity” to the road without inducing new demand, helping to preserve Loudoun's rural areas and working in conjunction with regional efforts to reduce long-distance driving by changing land use to better link jobs and housing.

³ http://www.virginiadot.org/business/resources/2-Roundabout_Cost_Comparison_Tool_Manual_v2.5.pdf

Further, the traffic-flow improvements provided by the single-lane roundabout, when combined with other traffic-calming measures, allow for Route 15 to remain one lane both north and south of the intersection. This would negate the need for the proposed \$81 million widening of Route 15 up to Montresor Road, and save taxpayers untold millions of dollars by avoiding the costs of future widening and interchange projects that proposal would necessitate. Indeed, this helps explain why the state has adopted a policy making roundabouts the preferred option over traffic signals where they are feasible, as is the case here.

The community deserves an opportunity to develop and evaluate a full-corridor roundabout and traffic-calming solution.

As discussed above, Toole Design's analysis shows that a roundabout at the White's Ferry Road intersection is not merely a practical solution, but the best one. And we believe it would save the County and VDOT from spending significant additional tax dollars over the life of the project. However, the analysis is also a strong indication of the real value and even greater cost savings to the County and the state from engaging the community in developing and evaluating a *full-corridor* traffic-calming solution before proceeding any further with proposals to widen Route 15 to four lanes. There is significant community support for roundabouts and calming traffic, and there is no lack of critical near-term transportation priorities in the County to which the cost savings of a traffic-calming approach could be applied.

Our shared assessment and recommendation, as we presented in June, is that any effective development and evaluation of a traffic-calming approach for the full corridor will require a community process which begins with public design meetings where community members envision what they want the corridor to be, and then help to identify specific context-sensitive solutions that promote that vision.⁴ Based on our detailed discussions with planning and engineering professionals, we believe such a process could be crafted to take as few as 13 weeks from start to finish and cost less than \$200,000, which represents a wise and worthwhile investment given the potential near-term and long-term cost savings that a traffic-calming approach would offer compared to widening, bypasses, and interchanges. The timeframe is relatively short and, if unsuccessful, should not unduly delay design and construction of other proposals for the southern part of the corridor.

We recognize that the county has engaged in various forms of public outreach regarding Route 15 to date. However, at no time has a comprehensive corridor-length traffic-calming alternative from Battlefield Parkway to Point of Rocks been offered or adequately evaluated. Nor have the drawbacks of a widening and bypass approach been adequately explained to the public. For example, the proposed widening in the southern portion of the corridor with retention of the traffic light at White's Ferry Road would simply move the bottleneck farther to the north. In addition, the new road capacity from widening would bring more traffic to Route 15, particularly from longer-distance commuters who will transfer from other routes to fill that new capacity. It could also encourage more land development (and resulting traffic) along the corridor in an area the County defines as rural, as developers cite the increased road capacity as justification when seeking approval for new subdivisions and additional housing units along the highway. A

comprehensive corridor-length roundabout and traffic-calming solution, by contrast, would improve safety and flow, ensure good access for area residents and businesses, and protect and enhance the economic value of this agricultural, scenic and historic area.

We therefore urge the county to work with the Commonwealth of Virginia and the local community in a visioning and design process for Route 15. Much like it did with the Route 50 project, the community engagement process that we envision can succeed in realizing an informed consensus on a concept and design that achieves the following objectives for the community:

- 1) maintain the ability to enter and exit driveways and side streets along Route 15 during peak hours;
- 2) make Route 15 safer;
- 3) reduce back-ups/congestion at the intersections;
- 4) improve options for walking and cycling;
- 5) reduce short-term and long-term expenditures on highways and maintenance;
- 6) preserve and enhance the historic character of Route 15 in keeping with the Journey Through Hallowed Ground National Heritage Area and National Scenic Byway;
- 7) work in harmony with the “main streets” of nearby towns and villages to support local social and economic exchange, and provide multimodal access to schools, libraries, and trails.

The general idea is to work with the community to determine what Route 15 should look like, feel like, and how it will operate, and then determine and design the best solutions for achieving that vision.⁵ We are confident the result will be an approach that reflects community priorities and strikes an appropriate balance between congestion relief, safety, local access, and historic integrity.

⁵ This is the context sensitive solutions process recommended in the JTHG Corridor Management Plan, which was adopted with county and state participation.

Summary and Request:

Toole Design’s consultant report demonstrates that a single-lane roundabout is the optimal solution for the Route 15/White’s Ferry Road intersection. It would make the road safer, improve access and flow compared to a traffic light, be implemented relatively quickly, and potentially save millions of dollars in the southern part of the corridor. Applying this approach to the entire corridor would make Route 15 safer, improve flow, enhance access for local residents and businesses, potentially save tens of millions of dollars, and preserve and enhance the economic value of agriculture, small business, and tourism in this historic and scenic corridor. A visioning and design process for development of this corridor-length alternative, which can be done in a few months and for less than \$200,000, is worthwhile because it offers the opportunity to reach community consensus and to save scarce transportation funds that can be applied to critical needs elsewhere in the county.

We therefore request that the County work with the state to implement a visioning and design process for developing a corridor-length roundabout and traffic-calming solution before taking any further action on the proposed \$81 million widening between Battlefield Parkway and Montresor Road.

We appreciate your attention to the many important land use and transportation issues in Loudoun County and to the safety issues on Route 15, and we hope you will endorse the design process we are recommending. We feel strongly that it is in the best interests of the residents, both current and future, of the Route 15 corridor and the entire County.

We would welcome an opportunity to discuss any of this with you further.

Thank you,

Stewart Schwartz
Executive Director
Coalition for Smarter Growth

John McCarthy
Acting President
Piedmont Environmental Council

William Sellers
President
Journey Through Hallowed Ground

Morgan Butler
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