

NOVEMBER 12, 2020

ROUTE 15 SOUTH SAFETY AND OPERATIONS FOCUS GROUP

DESIGN REVIEW WORKING GROUP

Journey Through Hallowed Ground Partnership

National Trust for Historic Preservation

Oatlands, Inc.

Piedmont Environmental Council

David Williams, Little Oatlands, LLC

Eugene Gulland, Aldie Ruritan Association

Summary of Concerns Regarding Route 15 South Proposal

The Route 15 South Safety and Operations Focus Group has formed a Design Review Working Group to review and comment on the preliminary working concept improvement alternatives (the “Proposal”) presented by AECOM at the October 1, 2020 meeting of the Focus Group. The members of the Working Group are listed above. Although the Working Group’s review is continuing, we have serious concerns about the Proposal from the standpoint of safety, need, and the preservation of the historic character and rural beauty of the area. Our concerns are summarized below.

Following the County Plans. The new Comprehensive Plan (including the Countywide Transportation Plan), which the Board of Supervisors adopted in 2019, states that the ultimate road capacity planned for Route 15 South, from Harmony Church Road to the Prince William County line, is two lanes. It strongly reflects the will of the citizens to preserve all aspects of the Rural Policy Area. Thus, the consultant’s public survey confirmed that “the *most important objective* for this study” is “maintaining the rural beauty of the corridor.” We believe County staff should adhere to the policy direction provided by the Board of Supervisors and the overwhelming views of the public.

Achieving Safety. The chief concerns expressed by citizens about the roadway are speeding and accidents. Safety was the second most important objective, according to the public survey. The fourth and fifth most important objectives are “enforcing current speed limits” and “reducing speed on Route 15 South.” Traditional approaches to improving safety tend to focus on treatments that provide excessive “forgiveness” for illegal and unsafe maneuvers. And that is what the consultant has proposed here. The proposed changes would do nothing to address speeding on the road—in fact, they would facilitate it, especially with the added southbound lane. Greater throughput is not the goal; orderly and safe, and scenic, progression through the corridor is the goal.

A well-documented, more forward-looking approach to designing safety into a road is what this corridor requires. Well-recognized road design modifications include using an environmental reference standard, setting the design speed equal to the desired speed limit, modifying lane width, using raised median sections at roads and entrances to protect turning traffic, and adding physical and visual cues to slow drivers to safe speeds. We want safety to be achieved primarily through passive design. That approach can then be supplemented by the tools of consistent enforcement of posted speed limits (currently,

enforcement is intermittent at best) and more thoughtfully designed signage (statistics on this road show that current signage is often ignored, and more signs detract from the byway's appearance).

The award-winning Route 50 Project already has created a successful example of this approach, and Route 50 offers many good ideas and years of favorable experience that can help improve safety and traffic flow on Route 15 South while maintaining its two-lane historic and rural character. A unified design of these two arterials is the best approach to achieving the goals of increasing safety and function.

Enhancing Heritage Tourism. Beyond controlling speed and illegal maneuvers, the design should highlight the scenic and historic sights and destinations along Route 15 South, which drive its economic success as a National Scenic Byway. Road treatments and sensitive wayfinding aids should highlight its assets. These include historic homes, historic districts, wineries, equine facilities, and recreational facilities. The Department of Economic Development (especially the Rural Economic Development Council) and Visit Loudoun should coordinate this approach with venues and property owners.

Promoting Preservation. The Journey Through Hallowed Ground's Byway Management Plan lays out the template for achieving a successful byway—which preserves the historic and scenic qualities by inviting tourism and providing interpretation. The study thus far has merely used standard sample sections for treatments that may suit average roads in other areas, but they are inconsistent with the values and goals that a byway is established to forward. The County's Preservation Planner should coordinate with Journey staff and property owners to establish a plan for realizing the goals of the byway.

Further on the subject of preservation: the design proposed by the County's consultants would interfere with lands along the route (comprising thousands of acres) that are dedicated to open space preservation through various mechanisms, including nonprofit mission and policy (e.g., Oatlands), conservation easements (e.g., Little Oatlands and Oatlands Hamlet), enlightened management across generations of family ownership (e.g., Oak Hill), and the agreement reached 25 years ago to require the great majority of the acreage of the historic Courtland Farm to stay in permanent open space (including 500 acres of conservancy lots of at least 100 acres each), in part to preserve and protect the historic character of Route 15 South.

Lack of Data Supporting the Proposal. There do not appear to be any studies or data or evidence supporting the premise of the consultant's proposed design—particularly in the vicinity of Oatlands—the assumption that traffic volume for those unimproved roads justifies road widening. Little Oatlands Lane, in particular, typically has very low levels of traffic (it serves only a handful of residences in addition to being a secondary access point to Oatlands not generally intended for visitor use). And the entrance to Oatlands itself typically sees heavier use only during weekend events, when the site has for decades successfully coordinated with County police as necessary for traffic control.

Conclusion. We look forward to joining in person with available officials, staff members, and consultants on Friday, November 13, 2020 for a caravan tour of the Route 15 South corridor from 10 AM to 2 PM to highlight some of the key heritage tourism destinations and to discuss the potential for more sensitive transportation solutions.

Excerpts from the Countywide Transportation Plan

3-1.9 Natural Features

The County will maintain vegetation and woodlands along roadways and incorporate landscaped medians using native species where possible.

3-1.20 Arterial Preservation

Significant arterial roadways, including all primary corridors and principal arterial roadways in the County, will be designed and maintained to support the flow of traffic through the County and the region, limiting local access points, and minimizing the use of traffic controls and allowances for cross-traffic. Preservation of these corridors will be coordinated with VDOT for acceptance into the VDOT Arterial Preservation Program as Mobility Enhancement Segments, and design of these corridors will be evaluated based upon the standards set forth for improving mobility in the VDOT Road Design Manual and Traffic Signal Justification Report Requirements.

3-1.27 Types of Traffic Calming

The County will work collaboratively with VDOT and the community in identifying appropriate traffic calming measures within the context of the surrounding area. Measures will be analyzed to determine the most effective tool for each project in coordination with surrounding residents and businesses.

Rural Roads Policies

3-4.6 Intent

Transportation road improvements in the Rural Policy Area will be focused on the safety of all users and will be designed to protect the rural character of the road network. Such improvements will be consistent with the Roadway Design Toolkit.

3-4.7 Traffic Calming

Traffic calming measures will be incorporated into road projects in the Rural Policy Area to improve safety, with particular focus on Towns, Villages, and other historic areas. Improvements to roads in or adjacent to existing Villages will incorporate site specific design solutions to preserve the existing aesthetic and character.

3-4.8 Improvements

All transportation improvements made within the Rural Policy Area will be designed to a rural standard, including use of shoulder and ditch sections, native plantings, and provision of turn lanes only where warranted and needed for safety and maintenance of traffic operations.

3-4.9 Roadway Districts

The County will seek to protect the historic and scenic qualities of roads within the Rural Policy Area through the designations of Historic Roadway Districts, Virginia Scenic Byways, and Historic Access Corridors.

3-4.10 Necessary Improvements

The County will seek to make only essential safety improvements on unpaved rural roads based on volumes, the nature of the road users (local vs. regional traffic), and crash data.

3-4.11 Preservation

The County will coordinate with VDOT on review of planned road improvement plans for rural roads so that the County can limit potential negative impacts on rural character, including features such as:

- Tree canopy
- Stone walls and fences
- Hedgerows
- Historic and Agricultural Structures
- Significant View Sheds
- Limestone / Karst topography

3-4.12 Low-Impact Improvements

The County supports maintaining the unpaved roads as feasible. In cases where unpaved roads must be paved, the VDOT Pave-in-Place and Rural Rustic Road programs will be used to the maximum extent possible. The County will work with VDOT to expand opportunities and refine application of these standards through legislation.

3-4.13 Unpaved Roads

The County's commitment to maintain unpaved rural roads is a de facto recognition of the traffic calming effect of these roads on local traffic. Other traffic calming measures along rural roads will be designed with considerations of rural context and character.

3-4.14 Roundabouts

Roundabouts should be considered as an alternative to traffic signals and stop controls in the Rural Policy Area.

Chapter 7 – Environmental and Heritage Resources...

Heritage Resource Policies

7-4.1 Preservation and Protection

The County supports heritage resource and archeological studies for transportation project and will implement measures to protect cultural, historic and archaeological sites which are affected by state-funded road improvement projects and supports archeological studies for state-funded improvements, including use of Section 106 and 4F processes when required.

7-4.2 National Scenic Byways

The County supports The Journey Through Hallowed Ground National Scenic Byway designation of US Route 15 and will incorporate the National Scenic Byway guidelines to ensure that improvements are constructed to meet these standards, as applicable. The County will coordinate with VDOT on road improvement plans along this corridor.