

**2007-2009 MACORTS Draft TRANSPORTATION IMPROVEMENT PLAN (TIP)
BikeAthens Review and Commentary**

Public Comment Period Open through August 3, 2006
Submit online comments to: macorts@co.clarke.ga.us

PLEASE PARTICIPATE. YOUR COMMENTS MADE A DIFFERENCE LAST YEAR.

Observations on Bicycle/Pedestrian Issues:

Good news. In comparing this year's TIP to those of the past, there are clear positive shifts toward improved pedestrian and cyclist access to roads, a more pervasive commitment to the accommodation of alternate modes of transportation in road and bridge construction, and a growing interest in the use of greenways and trails as transportation features. Many of the changes are rooted in decisions at federal and state levels, but much to celebrate is a result of voter approval of SPLOST 2005, some special congressional attention to greenway and trail funding, and strong public advocacy submitted during transportation plan comment periods.

On the downside, there is no improvement in the overall planning process to encourage more public involvement, and the opportunity for ACC Commissioner comment has been deleted. Some bike lanes referenced in the TIP are proposed as 4 feet wide, but as a matter of principle, bike lanes on roads with speed limits in excess of the 30-mph urban limit should be no less than 5 feet wide. Furthermore, two bike/ped "projects" are of special concern this year, as follows.

Athens Perimeter Interchange at US 78/Lexington Road (pg. II-05). The TIP description of the project has changed significantly. Instead of a statement that the new interchange "will include" connections to the Rail-Trail project (as in previous years), it now reads that the interchange project "will not preclude" those connections. This change, requested by GDOT, means the costs for Rail-Trail design and construction are likely to increase enormously *and* be shifted by GDOT onto ACC (see Athens Banner-Herald 7/26/06 http://onlineathens.com/stories/072606/news_20060726055.shtml). The reason for this GDOT request is unclear, and is puzzling given 1) their policy of accommodating alternative modes of transportation whenever feasible, 2) their commitment to including bike/ped facilities in many other TIP projects, and 3) the expressed desire and financial commitment of the Athens community to the Rail-Trail project.

ACC Bicycle Facilities System Improvements (pg. V-13). Bicycle facility improvements remain severely under funded—no SPLOST 2005 funds, and a \$50,000 reduction in anticipated ACC capital funds. Even worse, ACC capital funds are projected at only \$100K per year for the next six years, with no increases—that comes to less than one dollar per person for each ACC resident. Note that local sources of funding for bike projects are critical, as a 20% local "match" is required to attract an 80% federal/state funded share for any bike/ped projects.

On a positive note, three bike/pedestrian projects inserted in the 2006 TIP are looking more promising. Thanks to both Mayor Davison's efforts as Chair of the MACORTS, and to a healthy response from the public during last year's TIP-comment period, three stand-alone bike/pedestrian projects (i.e., not coupled with road construction projects) were included in the TIP on their own merit, to be considered for future funding. Although each of these projects went into the TIP with zero funding, the 2007 draft TIP indicates that these projects seem to be moving ahead, as follows:

College Station Road Bike Lanes (pg. IIA-10). This project to complete the CSR bike lanes between Research Road and Barnett Shoals Road has now been moved into a GDOT Work Program, meaning that it should merit serious consideration for state/federal funding in upcoming years. Accordingly, ACC should invest the required local matching funds by pre-designing this project, in order to attract federal/state funds and perhaps speed construction.

North Avenue Beautification (pg. IIA-11). Although not yet in the GDOT Work Program, GDOT has requested federal funding for construction in 2010. To be a "gateway" corridor, the project is to include a landscaped median, bike lanes, and pedestrian facilities.

Lexington Road Bike Lanes (pg. IIA-12). Like the North Avenue project, GDOT has requested federal funding for 2010 construction—adding bike lanes and a safety shoulder along Lexington Road between Barnett Shoals Road and Gaines School Road.

Other promising features of the 2007 draft TIP include the following:

Safe Routes to School (pg. III-15). Part of the latest federal transportation bill, and new in this year's TIP, GDOT will hire a statewide SR2S coordinator this fall. Several years of funding for SR2S are already in place, and should soon be available to communities on a competitive basis. Fortunately, Athens is one of only two communities in the state with an established SR2S program and is thus well-positioned to compete for significant funding that could be applied toward both bike/ped facilities construction and for education/outreach efforts.

College Station Road Bridge Improvement (pg. IV-01). Construction of a new bridge over the North Oconee River with bike/pedestrian accommodations has been moved forward one year, to 2009. We suggest that this bridge project be coordinated with completion of the College Station Road bike lanes out to Barnett Shoals Road.

Greenway Master Plan Projects (pgs. II-14, II-15, V-16). Several greenway projects are now funded through SPLOST and congressional allocations, including the Rail-Trail project, the Oconee-to-College Station segment of the North Oconee River Greenway, and a few other potential trails and rail-trails outlined in the Greenway Network Plan.

Lumpkin Street Improvements (pg. V-1). With funds coming primarily from SPLOST-funded storm water improvements, Lumpkin Street continues to undergo positive changes. Bike lanes are slated to appear soon between Rutherford Street and Five Points, and a final road section will add bike lanes and sidewalks between Baldwin and Broad streets.

ACC Sidewalk Improvement Program (pg. V-12). SPLOST 2005 and the ACC Capital Budget are the source for sidewalk construction funds averaging more than \$500 K for the next six years. Improved selection criteria adopted recently in ACC will be helpful in making the tough choices for sidewalk locations. Nevertheless, the high demand for sidewalks would warrant an even greater local investment in the future.

Danielsville Road (pg. II-1). An expensive road-widening project does at least come with the consolation of sidewalks on the west side, and a shared off-road path for pedestrians and cyclists on the east side. This project has been in the works for many years and is slated for construction this coming year. The bike/ped facilities will link very nicely with proposed North Avenue improvements, although the bridge over the Perimeter will still be an impediment.

Missing from the TIP. There are a number of bike/pedestrian projects that should be considered for inclusion in the current TIP. Two standouts are as follows.

Prince Avenue (Milledge to Pulaski) is possibly the best example, particularly this locally-controlled section Prince Avenue that is desperately in need of traffic-calming features and bike/pedestrian facilities. Already part of the Bicycle Master Plan, this project could be readily inserted into the 2007 TIP.

Milledge Avenue (East Campus to State Botanical Gardens) would be a particularly attractive project that would provide a near-complete bike/pedestrian path of 8-9 miles between Sandy Creek Nature Center and the State Botanical Gardens. The south end of Milledge between East Campus Road and Riverbend Road may be mostly amenable to restriping, and the segment between Riverbend Road and the Botanical Gardens is an ideal location for a share bike/pedestrian off-road path. Already part of the Greenway Network Plan, this project could also be readily inserted into the 2007 TIP.

Observations on Road Projects:

Sprawl inducers. Among the many road projects in the 2007 TIP, there are a number of examples where traffic volumes would not seem to warrant the proposed widening to a four-lane road. For example, Simonton Bridge Road in Oconee County hosts only 6,530 vehicles per day (and also has some vehement local opposition from residents and town planners who think it would be unwise to bring a four-lane road into downtown Watkinsville). ACC's Lexington Road between Whit Davis and Smokey Road handles only 11,130 vehicles per day. Although construction for widening of Lexington Road appears to have been pushed back at least a few years, to some time beyond 2012, it is still an expensive proposition - at least \$15 M for what promises to be a corridor for more sprawl development.

Growing costs. The estimated cost of many of the road projects seems to have gone up significantly. The ROW acquisition alone for Oconee County's SR 53/Mars Hill Road widening project has risen 75% since the 2006 TIP, from \$3.5 M to \$6.1 M. The ROW acquisition for the Lexington Road widening project has escalated approximately 40%, from \$4.2 M to \$7.4 M (construction costs would add at least another \$7.4 M). The construction costs for the Danielsville Road widening project have risen almost 60% in the past year, from \$4.4 M to \$6.9 M.

The funds for these road projects do not always come entirely from federal and state sources. For example, some \$1.2 M of the Danielsville Road widening project will be from a purely local source – SPLOST. And presumably, at least some part of the escalating costs for construction for that project will be borne by the local budget, from interest money earned on SPLOST accounts (as with the Barnett Shoals Road widening project a few years ago).

There are also several major ACC road projects that will be funded completely out of local coffers. Because they are locally-funded, these projects are entirely controllable by the ACC Mayor & Commission. For example, \$1.7 M in ACC funds will likely be directed to the 2010 construction of a new Perimeter interchange connecting the Atlanta Highway with Loop 10 near Heyward Allen Toyota. The Mayor and Commission recently approved the further expenditure of some \$1.5 M for a new four-lane Jennings Mill Parkway between Commerce Boulevard and Jimmie Daniel Road, despite a recommendation by several commissioners to make it only two lanes wide. This suggestion seemed justified given the skimpy long-term projected traffic counts on the corridor, and would have freed up a large sum of cash for other things requiring local funds – sidewalks in particular.

Overall, the sums in play for the road projects are huge, and make the relatively minimal local bicycle and sidewalk project budgets seem undeserving of the negative focus they sometimes receive.

Postponements. Several road projects seem to have been postponed a year or maybe more. Construction of the new perimeter interchange at Loop 10/Lexington Road has been pushed back to 2009, the perimeter interchange at Loop 10/Atlanta Highway has been pushed to “long range”, and the Lexington Highway widening is now slated for some time beyond 2012. Two former Macon Highway projects (widening of the road plus a bridge reconstruction) were eliminated from the TIP altogether. In contrast, the Oconee County section of Jennings Mill Parkway has been put on a faster track, with construction programmed for 2007.

Observations on the TIP Process:

Public participation. All public input collected will be presented as a written record to MACORTS representatives at the time they receive the final draft of the TIP (scheduled for late August to mid-September). Unfortunately, there are no opportunities for spoken public input in front of the Technical Coordinating Committee (the MACORTS advisory body) until August 23, the day the final draft TIP is to be approved. And sadly, the MACORTS Policy Committee (the official voting body) *never* offers an opportunity at their meetings for spoken public comment.

Nor will there be an opportunity for the public to comment in front of the ACC Mayor and Commission, or to a TV-viewing audience, as there has been in past years. The M&C received the TIP at a recent work session, with little briefing, but will not see the document again, even though the final draft TIP has come to them as an agenda item for “consideration” in the past. The lack of public comment opportunity is particularly egregious, given Mayor Davison has a vote on the MACORTS Policy Committee and could profit from direct citizen input. This lack of priority for the primary transportation planning document promotes the cycle of what is often a “disconnect” between the projects outlined in the TIP and the actual actions of the M&C.

Decision making. Another issue of process concerns the fact that Athens-Clarke County residents continue to be under-represented on the MACORTS. While only a small portion of the populations of Madison and Oconee counties are included in the MACORTS area, all of the population of Athens-Clarke County is included. Thus, with two votes for Madison County, two for Oconee, and two for Athens-Clarke, the 100K+ residents of ACC do not have their fair share of voting clout for the transportation issues that affect them.

Lastly, but importantly, BikeAthens repeated requests over the past two years to be considered for a seat on the MACORTS Technical Coordinating Committee have yet to receive any response. We believe that BikeAthens represents an active user group, and is at least as deserving of being a part Committee deliberations as are current members such as the Athens Downtown Development Authority, the Athens Area Chamber of Commerce, the Oconee Rivers Greenway Commission, the Navy Supply School.

July 27, 2006