



# City of Harrisonburg, Virginia

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April 3, 2017

## **TO THE MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL CITY OF HARRISONBURG, VIRGINIA**

**SUBJECT:** Public hearing to consider adopting the proposed City of Harrisonburg Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan update. The existing plan was approved on July 27, 2010 and amended on March 8, 2011. The purpose of the document is to provide a vision and framework for developing an interconnected bicycle and pedestrian network throughout the community. Among other things, the Plan describes its relationship to other city plans; and recommends goals, objectives, and implementation strategies.

### **EXTRACT FROM MINUTES OF HARRISONBURG PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING HELD ON: March 8, 2017**

Chair Way read the item and asked staff to review.

Ms. Dang said we have with us this evening from the Department of Public Works representatives including Tom Hartman, Assistant Director, and Erin Yancey, Public Works Planning Manager.

Tom Hartman, Assistant Director of Public Works, said I will take the first minute or two to tell you about the plan and how we got to where we are and then Ms. Yancey will tell you about the plan. We are glad to be here now at this point, at the end of the process we started on March 23, 2015. There was a lot of work that we went through these past two years with public meetings, focus group meetings, project evaluations, prioritizations, Bicycle and Pedestrian Subcommittee meetings, and Transportation Safety and Advisory Commission (TSAC) meetings. We had a lot of work to come together and put into this plan. We also worked with the Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan Subcommittee heavily on putting this plan together as part of the Comprehensive Plan.

The vision is the same vision that it was in 2011; basically we want to make sure we have a bicycle and pedestrian network that connects the City, that is safe and convenient, and that can meet the needs of the City through our sidewalks, bike facilities and shared use paths, and many other ideas and plans that we have outlined in the document. Similarly, the goals are unchanged from what they were on 2011. Like everything, when you update you change the wording a little bit, but essentially they say the same thing – to operate and enable safe access to all users, and to promote education and encouragement to use those facilities once they are created, so we can have kids and adults out using the facilities to get around through the City instead of using cars to lessen the volume on the streets where we can by the use of bicycle and pedestrian facilities.

Erin Yancey, Public Works Planning Manager, said not very many places within the City meet the vision of the plan as Mr. Hartman explained it. Mainly because the city grew so much during a time period when these trends favored low density development and that assumed that cars were the primary source of transportation. In more recent years we have seen a trend towards higher densities closer into

the center of the City. If you spend any time downtown or around JMU, you know that moving your car for every trip is not the most practical, biking and walking actually become the more convenient mode of transportation. Another reason we have the plan is that we have a fair amount of zero car households distributed across the city. Those people have mobility challenges and they need a way to get around. The map before you is probably skewed a little bit by college dormitories, but we also want to encourage students to get off campus into the community and into our local businesses.

We also have somewhat of a good idea of how many people would convert some of their trips to a bicycle if they felt like they could; if they felt like our infrastructure was safe enough to do that. Ms. Yancey referenced a bar chart she had provided and said as you can see with the bar chart, the green and red slivers represent the amount of people that are currently bicycling for transportation, less than 10% of the population. The orange part of the chart shows the amount of population that identifies as “interested, but concerned” about using bicycles for transportation. The gray part is the 30% of the population that will never get on a bike. There is a fairly wide cross section of the population that would bike if they felt like they could.

Ms. Yancey continued, the first thing that we did in developing the Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan was to conduct a fairly robust outreach process and that was to hear from the users of the bicycle and pedestrian network about what their needs were and what their vision for the plan was. The outreach process was crafted to reach both the general public and also specific user groups. One of the tools we used was an online wiki map where members of the public could add locations to the map where they felt that infrastructure improvements were needed. A JMU class also conducted interviews with ten different community organizations; a few of those included the Northeast Neighborhood Association, parent/teacher organizations, and the Shenandoah Valley Bicycle Coalition.

In the spring of 2015, Public Works hosted a workshop to get feedback from the general public about their vision and needs for the Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan. Public Works also hosted a series of focus groups to hear from specific user groups. Through those focus groups we heard from parents, teachers, school board members, and we heard from organizations that represent traditionally underrepresented groups such as the elderly, disabled, and refugees. There was a focus group for campus orientated stakeholders, including JMU, EMU, and retirement communities. We also heard from the Chamber of Commerce, Shenandoah Valley Partnership, small business owners, and Economic Development staff from the City. There was another focus group focused on housing choices and renter issues, where we heard from property management companies.

All of that public input fed into the vision and the goals of the plan. It also resulted in a list of over 200 locations throughout the City where the public felt that infrastructure improvements were needed for bicyclists and pedestrians. We separated out that list into four different categories—pedestrian segments, pedestrian intersections, bicycle segments, and shared use paths. Then, we did something that we have never done before, which was to evaluate all 200 of those needs identified by the public using data that essentially prioritized the projects in those four categories that I just mentioned. We used a tool called the ActiveTrans Priority Tool, which allowed us to customize factors and weights, which we would develop with the Bicycle and Pedestrian Subcommittee.

The first factor looked at was stakeholder input, which they weighted at a 3. That factor represents the amount of times that we heard a specific location needed improvements. We weighted it a 3 out of a possible 10 points because we felt that there was kind of a wide margin of error for that factor, but it was still valuable. The error coming from when they were collecting input from the community, we did not necessarily think that multiple people would identify an area on a map for improvement if it was already marked by another member of the public. The constraints factor we weighted at a 10,

which is the highest of the score that a factor can receive. It is basically a surrogate for cost or difficulty of constructability of the project. The difficulty would be due to having to purchase right-of-way from property owners and moving utilities. The existing conditions factor was also weighted at a 10 and it indicates the difficulty of navigating a certain location on a bike or by walking. It considers a lot of different data points such as the volume of traffic, the speed of traffic, and the number of lanes you would have to cross to get across the street. Connectivity was another factor and it is an indicator of the value of a location in the overall network. The connectivity factor prioritizes locations that connect to different facilities that already exist, if it connected a public transit stop or a school, it also would be prioritized for that factor. Equity was the last factor we considered and it was weighted at a 6. It prioritizes areas that are more densely built in the city and also areas that represent more people who would benefit the most from the bicycle and pedestrian network; that included density of low to middle income people, young people, and older people who are less likely to be driving and the zero car households.

I will note here that Public Works and the Bicycle and Pedestrian Subcommittee disagreed on the weighting of the constraint factor. The Subcommittee felt that it was skewing the priority list in the direction of easier projects of lesser value to the overall bicycle and pedestrian network; Public Works felt that it was more important to have a more achievable plan versus an aspirational plan that would be difficult to implement. We also felt that since this is a spreadsheet tool that we can easily sort the list based on the need factors, which are connectivity, equity, and existing conditions so that information is not lost in the process. We eventually came to a consensus that we would keep constraints weighted at a 10, but we would document the discussion well, and revisit it at the next update of the Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan, which will probably be in 5 years.

The ActiveTrans Priority Tool crunched all that data and it resulted in project lists for the four need categories. The project lists are still in location form instead of listing specific project improvements. The true value of the plan is just identifying the needs, these project details would be worked out during project development. As far as further vetting of the specific design details, we would vet those through the Bicycle and Pedestrian Subcommittee and for larger projects we would have a dedicated public involvement process. The implementation strategies included in the plan are focused on the five E's which are Engineering, Education, Enforcement, Encouragement, and Evaluation. This being a Public Works plan, it is focused on infrastructure and a lot of the implementation strategies are engineering focused.

How do we get the project list implemented? One way was to coordinate facility improvements with all city capital projects. A good example of that is when Council allocated funding for the construction of Bluestone Elementary School they also allocated money for biking and walking infrastructure. That has resulted in the biggest bicycle and pedestrian project we have had in the City yet with the Garber's Church Road shared use path. We also secure improvements from private development as any development that requires a comprehensive site plan is required by code to do provision improvements, which usually result in sidewalks and sometimes the dedication of right-of-way for shared use paths. We include bicycle and pedestrian projects in our Capital Improvement Program (CIP) and we have had a fair amount of success partnering financially with JMU and VDOT.

In using these implementation strategies, sometimes lower priority projects end up getting implemented quicker than projects that end up in the top 10; however, we believe that is okay. Other implementation strategies are more programmatic in nature such as the design specifications for bicycling and walking infrastructure in our Design and Construction Standards Manual. Such regulations exist so that we get the kind of infrastructure we want out of private developments. Also, operational safety measures are used to implement on our street network to make more comfortable

facilities for biking and walking; this might include signage or pavement markings to draw attention to the presence of cyclists and walkers. Public Works also administers the neighborhood traffic calming program in partnership with the Police Department. That program basically applies a phased approach to reducing traffic speeds in residential neighborhoods, so that road space can be shared between cyclists, pedestrians and motorists. There is a strategy to continue enforcement of all modes, ensuring that cyclists, pedestrians, and motorists are following traffic safety laws. There is also education and encouragement, which Public Works plays a supporting role in, usually by partnering with other organizations like the Safe Routes to School coordinators, Shenandoah Valley Bicycle Coalition, the Police Department, and the Harrisonburg-Rockingham Metropolitan Planning Organization, who all have little pieces of those strategies.

In terms of funding projects, we use local dollars and we usually try to stretch local dollars for bigger projects by applying for state and federal grants. We also secure some improvements from private development. None of these funding sources are for maintenance of infrastructure, so every time we are adding new facilities we have to stretch our existing maintenance funds further.

That is the nuts and bolts of the plan. In November of last year we held a public input meeting to present the plan to the public and get their feedback. We had over 35 people in attendance, which is a pretty big turnout for a Public Works plan. That kicked off a 30 day public comment period, where we received over 100 comments; we responded to all of the comments and our responses are posted on the plan website. Other city departments including the City Manager's office also reviewed the plan and provided input. Their input and some changes from the public comment period have been incorporated into the draft that was provided to you for review. The Transportation Safety and Advisory Commission and the Bicycle and Pedestrian Subcommittee both made motions to move the plan forward for your consideration. As far as the public adoption process we are here tonight to answer any questions or concerns you may have about the plan.

Chair Way asked if there were any questions for staff.

Mrs. Whitten said I am curious about the maintenance piece, why is that not a part of the planning?

Mr. Hartman said the plan for maintenance is part of what we do, and it is part of the document. We were just making sure that it is understood that as we add infrastructure for bicycle and pedestrian facilities it does not increase our maintenance paid dollars that we receive from the state. The maintenance dollars we receive from the state have to be stretched further to maintain those new assets or new infrastructure that we construct for shared use paths or sidewalk and bike lanes.

Mr. Colman asked whether that can be offset if more people are riding their bikes and there is less stress on our streets, or are there maintenance dollars for the roads only and not for other type of infrastructure like a shared use path.

Mr. Hartman said the maintenance dollars are for sidewalks, bike lanes, shared use paths and roadways, but it is one set of money. If we build Erickson Avenue a brand new roadway that adds four new lane miles to the City, we receive more money because we added that infrastructure. If we go out and build Bluestone Trail that adds a mile of shared use path we do not increase the maintenance funding that we receive; so we have to take our dollars and stretch them further. Offsetting vehicles to bicycles, we probably will not see any measurable change in maintenance to streets versus shared use path. As staff we are very cognizant because we continue to add shared use paths and typically our maintenance crews are not used to going out to Purcell Park every quarter, going down the trail and back just to check it, but now we are. We are allocating more funds to make sure we are maintaining it so that we do not forget about it.

Mrs. Whitten said my concern was it seems unsustainable unless you have a plan.

Mr. Hartman said we have a plan, we are very aware of trying to maintain what we have in a good condition, and do it when it is easy and a cheaper fix, versus waiting until a problem gets to the point where it takes a capital investment to improve it.

Mr. Colman said I think it is interesting regarding the priority tool, that the weight of the constraints was disputed by the Bicycle and Pedestrian Subcommittee. I just wonder how that will come into play with the Comprehensive Plan review where people will be more interested in this happening and whether they will speak more strongly about that. I am not disputing the fact that there is a lot more cost to that, I just wonder about the interest from the general population and citizenship.

Mr. Hartman said when we started the process we were going to try and cost estimate every single project, but we were just throwing numbers around and there was no confidence behind it. We did not want to say that this year shared use paths would need a million dollars and then when we go to actually develop it, it is five million. They are going to ask "what happened?" Instead, we are using the constraints on our way to convey costs and complexity of the project without tying ourselves down to some planning number that might or might not be exactly what it would cost to implement. That was our contention with the Subcommittee. It is an important thing for us to consider in our prioritizations; we do not want to have projects that rank a little high and have no possibility because they are 5-10 million dollar bicycle and pedestrian projects. There needs to be a balance of what we wanted, we could not put every weighting factor at a 10, we had to put some a little higher, some that are medium, and some that are low. We felt comfortable doing that. I think some of the discussion that we had with the Subcommittee happened after the projects were ranked.

Mr. Finks said could you explain how the scores come from the ActiveTrans Priority rank; what information went into to determine those?

Mr. Hartman said we had two very good interns from JMU last summer that sat down with all 200 projects and measured different things for each category. For the constraints, we had to look and see for example, are the sidewalks eight feet clear of right-of-way, behind the back of curb; the interns would go through our GIS and measure every bit of right-of-way. If we had it, then it would say right-of-way is clear, or if we did not have it, then it would say right-of-way is not clear. They would look to see if utilities were in the way, they would count the number of street lanes, and they would look at traffic counts. They would look at census data for the equity scores and then they would go through and populate this huge spreadsheet with all these projects. The spreadsheet itself would then crunch all those numbers and pop out those scores based on our weighting criteria.

Chair Way asked if there were any questions for staff. Hearing none, he opened the public hearing and asked if anyone would like to speak in favor or against this request.

Kai Degner, 1214 Old Richmond Circle, said I do appreciate all the process and the input and certainly I am in favor of it. Ultimately, you need to score and prioritize things. I wonder how nuanced that scoring system could be to favor projects based on connectivity to neighborhoods that need better access to work or to schools, one of the things that is keeping people in the way of getting safely to places of work, school, doctors those sorts of things. I cannot imagine a system that could actually incorporate all those things and I want to acknowledge that and make sure that the Planning Commission and Council sees that this priority list is not the only thing to be keeping in mind and maybe there are different ways to prioritize. What grant funds do we direct towards certain projects based on the actual impact to the residences, the businesses, and other service providers that are in the

area that need their clients to be able to get there in ways that maybe the bus system cannot accommodate?

Chair Way asked if there was anyone else that would like to speak in favor or against the request. Hearing none, he closed the public hearing and asked Planning Commission for a motion on the request for the purpose of discussion.

Mr. Finks said the draft looks great, thank you for all your hard work.

Mrs. Whitten said it really does, it is nice to hear about the work of JMU students too. It is really positive to be able to say we have interns that are very valuable.

Mr. Fletcher said other ways that this plan is important to planning staff is sort of the not so fancy things that come our way on a daily or weekly basis when we do minor subdivisions and so forth. Being that the Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan is an extension of the Comprehensive Plan, we can get right-of-way dedicated when subdivisions occur. The private development is not always seen, but we try to get that right-of-way dedicated when those smaller subdivisions take place. Those are things that do not get captured; but it is utilized and we take advantage of that.

Mr. Colman said I like the fact that when we were developing certain streets, roads or new right-of-ways that part of the plan is to put shared use paths or bicycle paths along the new or improved roads. I like that, it is a creative way to integrate it and I would like to see the City and staff to keep thinking in creative ways.

Chair Way said I agree with what everyone is saying, they did an amazing job putting it all together and it is really good. Based on what other people said the main concern is implementation. Making sure it actually informs not only private development but also the City when it comes to road development and road construction. I am glad to see more shared use paths around. I just hope that the principles you spelled out here really informed the whole of the City's policy making as well as being reactive.

Mrs. Whitten said I would also add that it is not just for the people that are here now as full-time residents or workers, it is also for people that are coming in. Tourism has become such a driving force in our community, and we want it to be a driving force in our community. There is an excellent book and the title of the book is Walkable City. It really does bring a lot of light to how important it is to be a walkable, bike friendly community and how attractive that is to business and to tourism.

Chair Way asked if there was any more discussion or a motion on the request.

Mrs. Whitten moved to approve the adoption of the Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan Update as presented.

Mr. Finnegan seconded the motion.

Chair Way asked if there was any other discussion. Hearing none, he called for a voice vote on the motion.

All voted in favor (6-0) to approve the adoption of the Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan Update as presented.

Chair Way said this will go forward to City Council on April 11, 2017.

Respectfully Submitted,

*Alison Banks*

Alison Banks  
Senior Planner