

LOCUST HILL CITIZENS' ASSOCIATION

9402 Locust Hill Road
Bethesda, Maryland 20814

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Yuqiong Bai
Project Manager
Maryland State Highway Administration
Office of Highway Development
Highway Design Division
Mail Stop C-102
707 N. Calvert Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21202

Caryn G. Brookman
Consultant Environmental Manager
Maryland State Highway Administration
Office of Planning and Preliminary Engineering
Environmental Planning Division
Mail Stop C-301
707 N. Calvert Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21202

Subject: Comments on *BRAC Intersection Improvements, MD 355 at Cedar Lane/West Cedar Lane- Air Quality Analysis Technical Report*

Dear Ms. Bai and Ms. Brookman:

This letter sets out the response of the Locust Hill Citizens' Association ("LHCA") to the State Highway Administration's ("SHA") request for comments on SHA's *BRAC Intersection Improvements, MD 355 at Cedar Lane/West Cedar Lane- Air Quality Analysis Technical Report*, March 2013 ("*Air Quality Analysis*"). We ask that this letter be incorporated in the record forwarded to federal officials for their review.

LHCA objects to any use of this report by SHA to fulfill its NEPA responsibilities with respect to Office of Economic Adjustment ("OEA") approval of Phase 4 of the BRAC Cedar Lane Improvements project. The *Air Quality Analysis* is fundamentally flawed since it does not separately address the environmental impacts of the construction and operation of Phase 4. Rather, it subsumes Phase 4 in a study that addresses the overall impact of the BRAC Cedar Lane Project, that is, Phases 1-4.

As a result, the *Air Quality Analysis* does not provide a basis for the separate assessment of the costs, benefits, and impacts of an OEA decision with respect to approval of Phase 4. This mis-scoping thus has the effect of preventing reviewing federal officials from assessing the benefits

and impacts on the Locust Hill community of now approving Phase 4, given that Phases 1-3 have already been approved for funding.

The *Air Quality Analysis* Inappropriately Attempts to Assess the Impacts of Phases 1-4 as a Whole

Phases 1-3 were the subject of their own NEPA process in 2010, and OEA approved funding of the federal portion of Phases 1-3 earlier this year. In turn, the “unbundling” of OEA approval of Phases 1-3 was undertaken so that OEA could make a prompt funding decision with respect to those phases while a separate, additional NEPA review could be conducted with respect to Phase 4.

Nevertheless, the *Air Quality Analysis* repeatedly and consistently refers to the subject of the study as assessing the air quality impact of a project for the overall “proposed widening and intersection improvements for the MD 355 intersection at Cedar Lane/West Cedar Lane,” page 1. The *Air Quality Analysis* describes the “project” it is assessing comprehensively to include Phases 1-4 as a whole:

The purpose of this project is to reduce roadway congestion and improve traffic flow and safety at the intersection and improve pedestrian safety and transit access by constructing an additional northbound through lane from North Wood Road to Cedar Lane/West Cedar Lane and a southbound through lane from Cedar Lane/West Cedar Lane to Wilson Drive.... One lane of widening will occur on West Cedar Lane and Cedar Lane. ... Phase 4 of the project includes full depth widening on northbound MD 355 for an auxiliary lane north of the intersection with Cedar Lane/West Cedar Lane to just north of Locust Hill Road. Extensive construction of retaining walls is necessary due to bifurcation between MD 355 and a parallel Service Road.

Page 13.

The *Air Quality Analysis* thus does *describe* Phase 4 separately from Phases 1-3 and also includes traffic delay forecasts with respect to Phase 4 in columns separate from Phases 1-3 in Table 4. However, it does not *assess* Phase 4 on a stand-alone basis using this data, nor address the operational impacts of Phase 4 on the adjacent residential homes.

Rather, the assessments simply refer to the project as a whole, e.g.:

On December 13, 2010, FHWA concurred with SHA’s recommendation that ... the proposed MD 355 at Cedar Lane/West Cedar Lane intersection improvements in Montgomery County [i.e., Phases 1-3] be classified as a Categorical Exclusions (CE). Therefore in accordance with the above referenced FHWA guidance, the project [i.e., Phases 1-4] would be considered a Project with No Meaningful Potential MSAT [Mobile Source Airborne Toxins] Effects. ... [T]his project will not result in changes in traffic volumes, vehicle mix, basic project location, *or any other factor* that would cause an increase in MSAT impacts of the project from that of the no-build alternative.”

The Stand-Alone Effects of Phase 4 on the Locust Hill Community Are Not Addressed by the *Air Quality Analysis*

By assessing Phases 1-4 as a whole, the *Air Quality Analysis* fails to address to fundamental issues with respect to the impact the limited, if any, benefits of Phase 4 in reducing congestion, and the likelihood that Phase 4's operation in the manner intended by SHA would increase pollution adjacent to Locust Hill.

Congestion. On August 10, 2012, Acting Secretary Mobley wrote Rep. Van Hollen that Phase 4 “provides a relatively low cost-benefit compared to the other phases,” and any such benefits “would be minimized” if the traffic signal for exiting Walter Reed traffic at the Rockville Pike-North Wood Road intersection remains operational after the completion of Phases 1-3. At the March 19, 2013 BRAC Integration Committee meeting, an SHA representative acknowledged that the ultimate status of the exit signal remains unknown.

The minimal delay-reducing benefits of Phase 4 are demonstrated by Table 4. According to that Table, using actual 2012 traffic counts, Phases 1-3 reduce projected afternoon delays at Cedar Lane by 51 seconds, Phase 4 by only a further 3.6 seconds. Using 2007 forecasts of 2011 traffic volumes, Phases 1-3 reduce projected afternoon delays by 107 seconds, and Phase 4 by a further 8.5 seconds.¹ As noted, if the North Wood Road exit signal remains in operation, even these small projected reductions in delay “would be minimized.”

Conversely, any projected delay savings attributable to Phase 4 at the Cedar Lane intersection, itself, must be *offset* by the delays that Phase 4 would create *above* Cedar Lane. In particular, the purpose of the auxiliary lane segment above Cedar Lane is to serve as a merge lane for traffic emerging from the Walter Reed campus. Because traffic in the auxiliary lane would be released by the Cedar Lane signal at the same time as through Rockville Pike traffic, that traffic would be released abreast of the block of through traffic being held at the signal.

In peak periods, many, if not most, vehicles in the auxiliary thus would have to wait for a break in northbound traffic to merge into the through lanes,² creating a delay queue that might be for a period as long as the northbound signal phase at Cedar Lane. The merge requirement inherent in Phase 4 thus would create a new point of delay that would need to be subtracted from any claimed reductions in delay at the Cedar Lane signal.

¹ In reviewing this projection, LHCA's traffic engineer found that certain delay savings attributed to Phase 4 were actually attributable to Phases 1-3. SHA has agreed with this observation. A corrected attribution could reduce the Phase 4 delay reduction using 2011 traffic forecasts by about 2 seconds, i.e., to less than 7 seconds.

² LHCA's traffic engineer concluded that a safety risk would be created by vehicles in the auxiliary lane attempting to merge into moving through lane traffic, not just from potential side swipe collisions, but from the fact that drivers looking left to merge into through traffic might rear-end vehicles slowing down to make a right turn into Locust Hill Road.

Air quality. Both Phase 4 and the Cedar Lane Project as a whole have air quality implications not addressed by the *Air Quality Analysis*. First, the congestion created by the delay queue at Locust Hill Road would create a new source of air quality degradation that would have especially adverse effects with respect to residents living along the affected segment of Rockville Pike.

The auxiliary lane would be 10 feet closer to homes than the existing lanes of Rockville Pike and within 100 feet of these residential units. This contrasts with traffic lanes below Cedar Lane, which are several hundred feet away from buildings on the Stone Ridge and Walter Reed campuses. Further, unlike the roadway below Cedar Lane, the auxiliary lane to be constructed by Phase 4 is on a significant upgrade. Traffic in the merge queue discussed above that has come to a stop, or near stop, thus could generate materially more pollution than vehicles beginning their acceleration at or before Cedar Lane. This additional pollution could include increased pollution from diesel vehicles caught in the merge-point congestion that need to (re)accelerate on the upgrade.

Thus, even if, due to decreased delays, overall emissions were to be decreased by the construction of Phases 1-3, construction of Phase 4 could increase emissions compared to construction of only Phases 1-3, both adjacent to Locust Hill and overall.

The Environmental Implications of Assuming Increase Single-Passenger Commuting Are not Considered

SHA's conclusions regarding the overall impact of the Cedar Lane Project on air quality appear, in part to be based on its view that: "This project has been designed to improve efficiency of traffic operation at the intersection, rather than increase corridor capacity; therefore, there is no noticeable change expected in the no-build and build traffic volumes or vehicle mix." However, the *Air Quality Analysis* also states that a further consideration in favor of the project is that, "job growth is expected at the National Institute of Health (NIH)" (page 1), implying that such job growth would mean more vehicles using the Rockville Pike segment between the NIH and Walter Reed campuses.

In fact, in the medium to long term (and Phase 4 would not be placed into service for several years), the vehicle impacts of job growth in the Rockville Pike corridor increasingly could reflect traffic management policies that incentivize commuters to shift from single-passenger vehicles to use of mass transit, car pooling, or shuttle vans to parking facilities outside the Beltway.

For example, in November 2012, the federal National Capital Planning Commission ("NCPC") requested that, regardless of on-campus employment growth, NIH cap the number of its on-campus parking spaces at their current level and work to reduce them until its employee/parking space ratio comes into line with federal guidelines for federal installations in the Washington area that are adjacent to Metro stops.³

³ See

http://www.ncpc.gov/DocumentDepot/Actions_Recommendations/2012November/Draft_NIH_Bethesda_Master_Plan_and_TMP_Action_MP02_November2012_.pdf (NCPC "**Recommends** that NIH amend the draft 2013 NIH-Bethesda Campus Master Plan to adhere to the applicable

As a review required by NEPA, the *Air Quality Analysis* thus inappropriately fails to take into consideration recent planning agency trends in favor of decreased use of single passenger vehicles as a means of accommodating commuters on the Rockville Pike corridor.

* * *

Based on the above considerations—and because Phases 1-3 constitute a previously-approved project—an air quality assessment intended to support OEA approval of only Phase 4 must assess the limited net benefits of Phase 4, standing alone. And it must do so in light of the actual environmental impacts of Phase 4 on Locust Hill residents. Because the *Air Quality Analysis* has not undertaken this task, the *Air Quality Analysis* cannot support an OEA decision with respect to approval of Phase 4.

Sincerely,



Richard Levine
President, Locust Hill Citizens' Association

Cc: Barbara Solberg, SHA

2004 Comprehensive Plan employee parking ratio goal of 1:3; does not support the addition of 1500 net new parking spaces and urges a reduction in parking spaces until the 1:3 parking ratio is achieved.”).