



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR MICHEAL GEORGE

September 3, 2025

Tim Sedosky
Director, Planning Division
West Virginia Division of Highways
Charleston, WV

Doug Kirk
Director, Technical Support Division
West Virginia Division of Highways
Charleston, WV

Subject: Avoiding Ill-Suited & Costly Route 51 Upgrade Project on Charles Town's Main Street

Dear Director Sedosky and Director Penn:

I write on behalf of a unanimous City Council and a unified public to convey our very serious concern about the "Route 51 Improvement Project" (State Project U219-51-7.00 02; Federal Project RHCH-0051 (052)D) that is under planning and design with the West Virginia Division of Highways (WVDOH). This Route 51 project, which could drastically alter Charles Town's main street and negatively impact a key neighborhood, continues to be planned in a way that is directly and substantially adverse to the input that City officials and the public have attempted to convey to WVDOH for four years, to deaf ears. Proceeding with this project will waste scarce state road resources on an unnecessary and overbuilt concept that is strongly opposed by the Charles Town community, a disturbing notion that we are ready and willing to make a major public issue.

The Route 51 Improvement Project

The pedestrian infrastructure on the West Virginia state roads of Route 51, Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, and Summit Point Road is badly degraded, with major gaps in connectivity. Sidewalks are crumbling or missing. There are no stormwater controls, which has led to damage to buildings. There is no street lighting. There are no crosswalks, including at a high-traffic three-way intersection. See enclosed photographs.

Over a decade ago in Spring 2015, the City of Charles Town completed a "West End Master Plan" for upgrading blighted properties and the degraded infrastructure of the West End, the historical core of the African American community and the most economically distressed Census block in the city. <https://cms2.revize.com/revize/charlestownwv/Documents/Services/Parks%20&%20Recreation/West-End-Plan-April-2015-Report.pdf>. That West End Master Plan identified a top priority to be the badly deteriorated sidewalks and street conditions on Route 51, which is Washington Street (Charles Town's main street) through downtown. Washington Street / SR-51 comes to a "Y intersection" with Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and County Route 13 (Summit Point Road) at the west end of downtown. That Charles Town Master Plan makes two key recommendations (West End Master Plan at p. 2.6, bold added):

- Address **transportation safety** to “calm traffic . . . this is especially important at the intersection of W. Washington Street and Martin Luther King Boulevard . . . to create a stronger . . . balance . . . between pedestrian, bicyclist and motorist.”
- “Create transportation improvement with an emphasis on creating complete streets . . . with a full complement of **infrastructure to serve multiple modes, including vehicular, bicyclists and pedestrians**. As part of achieving a highly walkable community, investment in completing and improving sidewalks throughout the study area should be paramount and should include an investment in creating desirable and attractive streetscapes which include safe crosswalks, lighting, street trees and other pedestrian and bicyclist amenities. Of all the recommended transportation improvements, the proposed projects along WV Route 51/W. Washington Street, Augustine Avenue, and Martin Luther King Boulevard should be considered as the highest priority.”

These core recommendations were echoed in the “City of Charles Town Walkability and Connectivity Study” completed in August 2016, funded in part by the State of West Virginia, which found the sidewalk conditions in this West End to be among the worst in the city. See https://cms2.revize.com/revize/charlestownwv/Documents/Government/Plans%20and%20Proposals/CT_Walkability_Connectivity_Study.pdf at pages 12, 13, 15, 16 & 17. That plan identified the W. Washington/MLK Boulevard/Route 51 area as the highest priority for pedestrian upgrades.

Soon after, the Hagerstown-Eastern Panhandle Metropolitan Planning Organization (HEPMPO) placed this Route 51 connectivity, walkability, and infrastructure improvement project in its Long Range Transportation Plan, and its Transportation Improvement Program.

None of these efforts identified any need for a drastic expansion of roadway capacity or the need for higher vehicle throughput on this corridor.

WV Division of Highways Begins Planning Route 51 Improvement Project – But Shuts Out the City of Charles Town and the Public

These critical needs are why the City of Charles Town was so pleased that the WV Division of Highways commenced a planning and feasibility study in 2019 (although nobody learned about this until early 2021 when a Feasibility Study was issued with a call for public comment, see <https://hepmo.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/210528-WV-51-W.-Washington-St-study.pdf>).

That WVDOH feasibility study finds that the Y Intersection showed a number of generally non-serious, “slow-and-stop” rear-end vehicle crashes (10 crashes in five years, none fatal); that current and future levels of service are expected to be failing; and that improvements to the intersection are warranted. The study found a peak hourly traffic count of 1241 in the busiest hour of the corridor. That feasibility study looked at three alternative road upgrades to address the Y Intersection, along with pedestrian infrastructure improvements, bicycle intersection improvements, West End intersection improvements, access improvements, on-street parking improvements, roadway lighting improvements, stormwater management improvements, overhead utility relocation improvements, and rail crossing improvements for the Norfolk-Southern line at the far western end of MLK Boulevard. In May 2021, WVDOH and HEPMPO held a video-conference based public input session, and took written comments. The feasibility study recommended advancing the project to the next stage of the NEPA process.

While many in Charles Town welcomed the focus on this corridor and were pleased that the WVDOH feasibility study called for consideration of pedestrian, bicyclist, lighting, stormwater, and streetscaping improvements, the WVDOH approach soon became a contentious cause of major concern in the community. Concerns from city officials, the public, HEPMPO and others were raised that roadway alternatives were over-designed and would result in an over-built roadway that would negatively impact the neighborhood without any real benefits except to accommodate rapid throughput for vehicles (which of course, could further endanger people walking, biking, or crossing this area). Many comments were filed asking WVDOH to prioritize pedestrian and streetscape upgrades, and reconsider the roadway options to be more appropriate.

However, calls to WVDOH Planning officials, Engineering officials, and District 5 officials by representatives of the City of Charles Town were, and continue to be, rebuffed and ignored.

- The City has called for discussion and collaboration on design goals and approaches over and over, with no response.
- HEPMPO has asked for additional discussions on design, with no response.
- A July 2022 letter about this project and our concerns from the Mayor and Council to WVDOT Secretary Jimmy Wristin, the WV Region 5 District Engineer, and other WVDOT officials was ignored, with no response.
- WVDOT submitted a “RAISE Grant” application to the Biden Administration’s U.S. DOT to fund this Route 51 project in 2023, without telling anybody in Charles Town or conducting any state-local coordination.
- A January 2024 letter from the Mayor and City Council of Charles Town to WVDOT Secretary Wristin and other WVDOT officials and its consulting engineer stated that “City staff and council strongly desire to be informed of the status of this project as it progresses and to partner with WVDOT in ensuring this project moves forward with the very best interests of residents and roadway users fully considered”, but that letter has been completely ignored.
- On January 29, 2024 the City of Charles Town held its own Community Input meeting, as WVDOT had refused to conduct any such community engagement. While a District 5 representative attended, nobody from WVDOT spoke or gave any information. This heavily-attended community meeting drew major and near-unanimous community opposition to all of the WVDOT’s proposed alternatives.
- A City and HEPMPO officials attended a field meeting with senior WVDOT officials in Charles Town in July 2024 and raised these concerns, which never received any response or guidance.
- The summer of 2024, the City of Charles Town learned on our own that WVDOT had hired engineering firm A. Morton Thomas (AMT) to conduct a Design Study, but the contractor refused to speak with any city or HEPMPO officials, saying, “you are not my client.”

In September 2024, WVDOH and that AMT firm issued a “Design Study” doubling the May 2021 alternatives from three to six alternatives. The city and the community reviewed this extensively, met with WVDOT field staff on site, and made clear that none of the six alternatives are acceptable. Five of the six alternatives are drastically over-designed and would result in projects that are badly overbuilt, causing negative impacts to the neighborhood. At the same time, the WVDOH/AMT design study gives short shrift to the pedestrian and streetscape infrastructure improvements that are the root need in this corridor, and the entire motivating justification for why Charles Town and HEPMPO commenced these plans a decade ago. While detailed cost estimation is conducted in this Design Study for vehicle roadway components, this

study provides no cost estimation for streetscape improvements or environmental mitigation (see p. 53 of that report). Further, for no good reason, the Design Study abandons planning for sidewalk and streetscape improvements between the pedestrian infrastructure downtown (ending at intersection of W. Washington Street and West Street) and the Y Intersection (see Study at pp. 13-15). Nor does the WVDOH consider the need for sidewalks on the Summit Point Road portion of this study area, which has a total lack of sidewalk or pedestrian facilities.

On August 5, 2025, WVDOT NEPA officials and contractors held a box-checking NEPA public comment meeting in Charles Town that resulted in no new information or any further consideration of Charles Town's years of input. At that meeting, WVDOT distributed a handout that stated that this project will now move into preparation of the NEPA document and preliminary engineering and design, in "Fall 2025 / Fall 2026".

In early 2025, WVDOH officials informed elected and staff officials in the City of Charles Town on a videoconference that, "honestly, as this is a state road, nobody at WVDOT cares about the city's or the local public's views on design" on Charles Town's main street, and suggested that the only way to get any attention would be to speak with newly-elected Governor Patrick Morrisey.

Specific Request for Relief from City of Charles Town

Charles Town remains concerned that this WVDOH Route 51 project is over-engineered and could result in drastic, overly-expensive over-building of a vehicle corridor that will cause negative impacts. Further, Charles Town does not believe that the planning and design work thus far has given adequate consideration to the real needs for pedestrian infrastructure improvements, bicycle intersection improvements, intersection improvements, access improvements, on-street parking improvements, roadway lighting improvements, stormwater management improvements, overhead utility relocation improvements, and rail crossing improvements. For those reasons, the City of Charles Town requests:

- 1.) **Meetings to collaborate on design:** In 10 years of community planning and now five years of WVDOT planning, we have yet to have a single meeting with WVDOT about the community's desired design goals and objectives for this transportation corridor project, despite all our requests. We request a meeting in Charleston or Charles Town with WVDOH officials who have the authority to adequately address these project design concerns, to establish a plan and schedule for further interaction on the community's design concerns, before this WVDOH project moves into more expensive design on alternatives that are not desired by Charles Town.
- 2.) **Focus this project on sidewalk, streetscape, and pedestrian/cycling infrastructure in the study area:** The main need in this corridor is sidewalk and streetscape infrastructure between the downtown at the intersection of W. Washington Street/West Street, through the Y Intersection, and along the MLK Boulevard and Summit Point Road corridors. We urge DOT to re-focus this effort on these critical needs.
- 3.) **Include improvements to the failing intersection at W. Washington Street & West Street in downtown:** Charles Town is pleased that WVDOH has given focus to improvements to the failing intersection at the west end of downtown, at W. Washington Street and West Street, which had 23 crashes during the WVDOH study period, and for

which there are straightforward solutions as identified in the state's September 2024 Design Study.

- 4.) **Charles Town rejects the over-engineered and harmful Alternative 1 Roundabout at the Y Intersection:** The September 2024 WVDOH/AMT Design Study that undergirds this project calls for a drastically over-designed roundabout/roadway reconfiguration that will cause harmful impacts to the community. Charles Town strongly opposes this current roundabout design.
- 5.) **Alternative 5 Traffic Signal:** Charles Town believes that the only WVDOH alternative to address the Y Intersection that is worthy of any further consideration or expenditures is "Alternative No. 5 – WV 51 and CR Traffic Signal" together with what WVDOH describes as "appropriate and exclusive lanes on the approaches" – coupled with pedestrian and streetscape upgrades throughout the corridor. As found by WVDOH in the June 2024 Design Study, this Alternative 5 is the highest-ranking solution evaluated by WVDOH (Study at p. 52), costing 40% less than Roundabout Alternative 1 (Study, pp. 50 & 52), with highly superior environmental, drainage, ROW and utility impacts over the Roundabout alternative. Any further consideration of Alternative 5 must also include consideration of avoiding vehicle stacking at the far west side of MLK Boulevard at the active Norfolk Southern railroad crossing.

We will follow up with WVDOT to find a good time for us to meet soon to get the Route 51 Improvement Project back on track. Thank you for your consideration from the Office of the Mayor, a unanimous City Council and staff, and our public.

Sincerely,



Micheal George
Mayor of Charles Town, WV

cc: District 5 Engineer J. Lee Thorne
City Council and involved City Staff
Matt Mullenax, HEPMPO Executive Director

MG/cv

Attachment (1)

Project Area Sidewalk Conditions

North side of Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard facing west:



North side of MLK Boulevard facing east toward Y Intersection & Downtown:



**Typical/representative sections on south side of MLK Boulevard with no sidewalks
(first facing east, second facing west)**



Typical/representative section of Summit Point Road with no sidewalks (facing west)

