



December 28, 2009

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Mr. Kevin T. Newcomb
City of Richmond Department of Public Works
Via email

Dear Mr. Newcomb:

I would like to offer the following comments regarding the Forest Hill Avenue improvement project and would appreciate you incorporating these suggestions as the project moves forward.

I am very familiar with this stretch of road. Though I live in the First District, I had an office in this corridor for three years so I have ridden and driven this corridor literally hundreds of times over the past thirty years and am all too familiar with the deficiencies and dangers of this stretch of Forest Hill Avenue.

This is truly a unique stretch of road. In the project area, the James River, Powhite Creek, RMA, Norfolk Southern railroad and Willow Oaks Country Club all converge and act as barriers to traffic flow and funnel many users through the area focused at the RMA overpass. Besides car traffic, this stretch is the major southwest artery for bike and pedestrian commuters, recreational cyclists and bike tourists. There are, unfortunately, no convenient bike/ped alternatives to this corridor. Unique characteristics of this section of Forest Hill Avenue include:

- designated as US Bike Route 1, an AASHTO designated interstate bike route (which starts in Calais, Maine and ends in Key West, Florida. Bike riders from, literally, around the world travel through Richmond along this route);

The Virginia Bicycling Federation is an inclusive member-driven organization that advances bicycling in Virginia

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- designated as part of the City of Richmond's Riverside Trail;
- designated as an identified bike route in the Richmond Master Plan (2000)
- designated in the 2004, *VDOT/ Richmond MPO Richmond Regional Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan* as part of the region's
 - “Bike and Pedestrian Network”
 - “Pedestrian Node and Corridor”, and
 - “Proposed Bicycle Touring Route”;
- is a very popular area for recreational bike riders with a number of local rides which use Stratford Hills Shopping Center as a starting point
- Serves as the only direct route providing bicycle and pedestrian access to the commercial corridor west of Hathaway from the largely residential areas east of the Powhite (as evidenced by the picture of the utility bicyclist on page 202 of the City's Master Plan).

In the 2004 VDOT/ Richmond MPO bicycle and pedestrian plan, this corridor received a Bike and Pedestrian Level of Service (BLOS/ PLOS) rating of, “E “ (poor) on an A – F scale.

Based on the 2004 Commonwealth Transportation Board's *Policy to Integrate Bicycle and Pedestrian Accommodations*, I believe this project should more fully consider the needs of bicyclists and pedestrians based upon the above noted conditions.

Please consider the following changes as in this project:

- dedicated bike lanes: full, five foot, designated bike lanes should be included as an integral part of the project. This is consistent with the City Master Plan. Based on preliminary drawings for this project this should be easily achieved.

- slowing traffic to 35 mph through the corridor to be more consistent with the context of the surrounding land use and the revised streetscape;
- a physical pedestrian refuge at Rettig (rather than just paint) offering greater physical protection to pedestrians crossing Forest Hill Avenue;
- modification of slip lanes at the RMA off-ramp (westbound). With the current design, drivers are forced to look over their shoulder for approaching traffic. This poses a particular danger to bikes and pedestrians who are navigating this interchange and acceleration lane. Pavement markings are needed to enhance the awareness of non-motorized users moving through this interchange while also giving all roadway users clear cues as to how to do so. Additionally, the off ramp should be re-designed with a more acute angle resulting in better sight lines, forcing drivers to enter Forest Hill at slower speeds while also providing deflection to help ensure proper yielding to bicyclists and pedestrians moving through the interchange. The aforementioned lowering of the design/target speed would also reduce the length of the acceleration lane, thereby reducing the exposure of bicyclists in this weave maneuver.
- inclusion of bike accommodations via pavement markings (lines or sharrows) to ease the transition onto the RMA bridge, east of the project where the pavement narrows. Cyclists riding north on US Bike Route 1 (and many recreational cyclists/ commuters) take a left on to Fairlee which, frankly, is treacherous and markings should be considered to assist in facilitating the left turn onto Fairlee;
- appropriate accommodations at Hathaway Road (and beyond) to allow users to safely access stores and businesses and neighborhoods in the corridor

Having biked this section of road many dozens of times, I am glad to see it finally being upgraded for all users. Even as an experienced cyclist, I find crossing Forest Hill at Retting on US BR 1 unsettling. Cycling along this stretch of Forest Hill can be treacherous and unpleasant. Given a choice, I believe less experienced bicyclists would simply try to avoid riding Forest Hill altogether, however as noted, there are really no other alternate routes, so for many they must either bicycle this route, or choose a different mode of travel.

This section of Forest Hill Avenue is an important transportation link in the metropolitan area and we will have to live with the changes for many decades to come. Though this is a very difficult and dangerous stretch of road for cyclists and pedestrians and drivers, it is imperative that we do our best to get all of the needed improvements right.

It should also be noted that VDOT is working with the City of Richmond to upgrade the signals on Forest Hill Avenue at the Powhite. This is a prime opportunity to coordinate those two efforts and leverage all resources to enhance and improve the conditions noted above relating to bicycle and pedestrian movements across the bridge and through the Powhite interchange. The UPC number for the project is UPC 93394 and the VDOT project sponsor, Stephen Read, has noted the possibility of coordinating these projects in this manner.

I hope we can approach this project from as broad a perspective as possible so that all users may feel comfortable traveling along Forest Hill Avenue for years to come.

Thanking you for your consideration, I am

Sincerely,

Champe Burnley
President,
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