

Chapter 8. Transportation

8.1 Overview of Existing Transportation System and Plans

8.1.1 Current Transportation System



The transportation system in Madison County consists of a few primary or main roads and many smaller paved and unpaved roads through the river valleys and coves and over a few of the mountains. The largest roadway is the newly-completed Interstate 26 (completed in 2003) that runs between Buncombe County and Unicoi County, Tennessee, and next to Mars Hill. It was a monumental construction project which changed the shape of the terrain in this part of the county. It now carries, on average, over 9,300 vehicles a day. The next most traveled roadway in the county is US 25-70 between the Buncombe County line and Marshall, carrying an average of 8,300 vehicles a day. The other main roads in the county are NC 213, which connects Mars Hill and Marshall, NC 209 which runs from Haywood County to Hot Springs, NC 208 in the northwest part of the county and US 19 which connects Mars Hill and I-26 to Burnsville, Yancey County and beyond.

Roadways are the primary means of transportation in the county. There is also an active freight train line, operated by Norfolk Southern, that runs along the French Broad River through the county. A county authority runs a limited public transportation service which is described below in section 8.1.4. The towns have pedestrian facilities (sidewalks, crosswalks) in their downtown areas and the Town of Mars Hill developed a Pedestrian Plan in 2007. Mars Hill has a paved trail along Gabrielle Creek that connects Mars Hill College and downtown to the elementary school, but no other greenways/trails for transportation purposes exist currently in the county. There is a large network of hiking trails, including the Appalachian Trail, in the Pisgah National Forest, but these are primarily used for recreation rather than transportation.

8.1.2 Transportation Plans and Planning

Madison County is part of a regional transportation planning organization, the Land-of-Sky Rural Planning Organization (RPO). The RPO brings together representatives from Madison, Haywood, Buncombe and Transylvania counties and NCDOT to determine plans and priorities

for transportation projects in this region. NCDOT takes the recommendations from regional planning organizations and develops a statewide plan and capital spending program – called the Transportation Improvement Program, or TIP – to implement high priority projects from across the state. Every two years, the regional planning organizations update their priorities and NCDOT updates statewide plans.

The RPO recently revised its Priority Needs List of high priority projects and a couple projects in Madison received high priority on this list:

- Priority #2 – I-26/Hwy 213 interchange: Connect Frontage Road to Hwy 213 or I-26 exit
- Priority #3 – Bruce Road: Upgrade and widen near Main Street in Mars Hill
- Priority #7 – NC 208: Upgrade roadway from US 25-70 to Tennessee state line
- Priority #8 – NC 209: Upgrade and realign between NC 63 and US 25-70

Some of these will likely be implemented over the next 5-10 years, as they are programmed into the TIP.

NC Department of Transportation (NCDOT) is currently working with Madison County and staff at the Land-of-Sky RPO to develop a **Comprehensive Transportation Plan** for Madison County. It is expected to be complete by the end of 2010 and will consider and include recommendations from this Comprehensive Plan as transportation recommendations are developed.

NCDOT's planning has evolved from simple bridge and highway thoroughfare plans to Comprehensive Transportation Plans (CTPs). Thoroughfare plans identified the existing and proposed highway network needed to handle existing and future traffic. The CTP is a multi-modal plan that identifies the entire existing and future transportation system which includes highways, public transportation, rail, bicycle and pedestrian facilities needed to serve the anticipated travel demand. The CTP strengthens the connections between an area's transportation plan, adopted local land use/development plan and the community's vision.

Additionally, each rural or community transportation system is required to have a Community Transportation Services Plan, commonly referred to as a "5-year plan," which "reviews the current performance and organizational direction of the transit system and recommends alternative strategies of operating or managing that increase mobility options for passengers and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the organization and transportation services," according to the NCDOT web site.

8.1.3 Comprehensive Transportation Plan – Initial Insights


As stated in the previous section, a Comprehensive Transportation Plan (CTP) for Madison County is currently under development. A draft vision statement for transportation in the county has been developed: "Provide a safe, reliable, efficient, and sustainable multi-modal transportation network that enhances quality of life and economic vitality while preserving the natural environment and community character and supporting the county's vision for future

land use and development.” To go along with the vision, a set of preliminary objectives has been developed for the CTP. They are:

- Complete a study of transportation facilities and develop a plan with recommendations that address safety and mobility and consider economic impacts.
- Improve the safety, connectivity, and mobility of the transportation system, for people and freight, for all modes of transportation in and through the region.
- Make informed transportation decisions that are sensitive to the environment and community character
- Coordinate with the land use and other plans of Madison County and its municipalities.
- Coordinate with Madison County Emergency Management and relevant organizations to ensure that emergency plans are considered in plan development.

MADISON COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE TRANSPORTATION PLAN SURVEY

NCDOT and Land-of-Sky Rural Planning Organization are working with Madison County to develop a Comprehensive Transportation Plan (CTP) to determine the county's future needs for roads and other transportation facilities. Citizen input plays a vital role in this process. We are conducting a survey of county residents to identify transportation needs and priorities. You can complete this survey from Monday, July 26th through Friday, September 4th online at www.landofsky.org or by visiting a Madison County library, community center, or town office.



The survey can be completed and submitted online. Completed paper surveys can be left at the above pick-up locations or mailed to:

Heather Strassberger, Land-of-Sky RPO
339 New Leicester Hwy, Suite 140, Asheville, NC 28806
Phone: (828) 251-6622 / Fax: (828) 251-6353 / RPO@landofsky.org

As a first step in the CTP process, a **public survey** was conducted in the summer of 2009 to help develop the goals and objectives for the CTP and gather information on residents' concerns related to transportation. The survey was available both online and in paper form at locations throughout the county and was advertised in the News-Record and Sentinel, French Broad Electric Power bills and by RPO and county staff at locations throughout the county. While every effort was made to encourage participation by a broad cross-section of the population, this was an informal public opinion survey, not a scientific study. More public input opportunities, such as workshops in communities throughout the county, will be held before the plan is completed. 183 completed surveys were returned by September 4th and some preliminary results have been drafted, as follows. Transportation system goals and objectives that were ranked highest were:

- Preserve community character: preserve downtown business districts and keep rural areas rural; and
- Protect the natural environment.

The two goals receiving the lowest scores were:

- Promote economic development – large business or industry; and
- Reduce congestion and travel times.

The comparatively low priority placed on reducing congestion is likely an indicator that not much congestion exists on Madison County roadways.

Survey respondents were also asked which transportation improvements should be considered.

The top five responses were as follows:

- Provide or increase bus service (60% chose this)
- Build and promote park-and-ride lots (51%)
- Add on-road bike lanes (51%)
- Provide passenger rail service (50%)
- Build and promote greenways and off-road paths (45%)

The survey results showed that people are generally satisfied with the road network and its capacity – congestion is not a big concern. They are very concerned about preserving rural and community character, and they would like more transportation options available, especially more transit services and park-and-ride lots.

8.1.4 Public Transportation Services

Madison County Transportation Authority (MCTA) is the coordinated public transportation service for Madison County and it provides transportation services from the populated areas to the remote areas of the County. A round trip to and from remote areas can add up to one hundred miles or more. MCTA provides trips outside the county to Haywood, Yancey and Buncombe counties and the towns of Newport and Greenville, Tennessee.

Madison County Transportation Authority has a Transportation Advisory Board that consists of representatives of elected county officials, local agencies and community and business representatives. It meets monthly at the new Madison County Transportation Facility at 387 Long Branch Road in Marshall. This facility was completed and occupied in August, 2007.

Madison County Transportation Authority is a demand-response transportation service. MTCA requires a 24-hour advance reservation for local trips and a two-day (or more) advance notice for out-of-county trips. It provides services for general and medical trips and provides transportation to all the nutrition centers within Madison County. Madison County has a large number of passengers over the age of sixty, people with disabilities, and with financial and mobility constraints; thus their ability to utilize a transportation service is vital to their well-being.

Madison County currently has a fleet of 11 vehicles. Services are provided from 6:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. The fleet consists of:

- Three 8-passenger lift vans with two wheelchair stations; and
- Eight 14-passenger standard vans.

Prioritized Public Transit Needs

A public and stakeholder workshop was held in the County in 2008 as part of the *Coordinated Public Transportation and Human Services Transportation Plan* (adopted March 20, 2009 by the Land-of-Sky Rural Transportation Planning Organization). Needs were identified by participants and then prioritized. The following list contains the prioritized needs from this workshop, which appear in the referenced transportation plan.

Public Transportation Needs (listed in priority order):

1. Expansion vans
2. Route to tie together Hot Springs, Marshall and Mars Hill
3. More lift-equipped vans
4. Routes for daily cancer treatment
5. GPS and communication capabilities
6. Planning grant to identify work commuting patterns
7. Lifts for larger chairs (equipment updates)
8. Van from Mars Hill Park & Ride to meet Asheville Transit
9. Connector from Spring Creek to Hot Springs
10. Attendants for visually impaired
11. Route to Mountain Recovery (addiction treatment located in Asheville)

8.2 Scenic Byways

The NC Department of Transportation has designated 51 scenic byways to give visitors and residents a chance to experience North Carolina's history, geography and culture, while also raising awareness for the protection and preservation of these treasures. Byways are carefully selected to portray the diverse beauty and culture of the state and to provide travelers with safe and interesting alternate travel routes. The routes are clearly marked with N.C. Scenic Byways signs. More information and maps are available at NC DOT's website: http://www.ncdot.org/doh/operations/dp_chief_eng/roadside/scenic/.

Typically local leaders identify a section of roadway they would like to have designated and work with NCDOT to attain designation. Designation helps preserve the scenic character of the roadway. For example, the North Carolina General Assembly passed a bill in 1993 that bans billboards ("outdoor advertising signs" as defined in G.S. 136-129) from along scenic byways or scenic highways.

Madison County contains three NC Scenic Byways: "Appalachian Medley," along NC 209 and US 25-70 in the western part of the county; I-26 from Mars Hill north to Tennessee; and "French

Broad Overview,” which primarily follows NC 251 between Alexander and Marshall. The maps below show these byways.

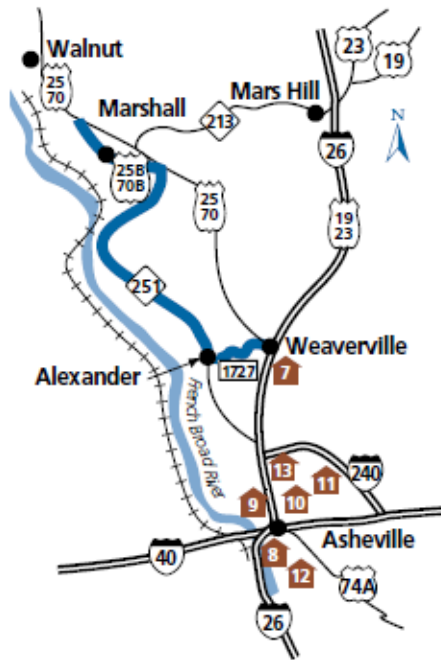
Appalachian Medley:



I-26 Scenic Highway:



French Broad Overview:



8.3 Transportation Recommendations

Because the County is in the middle of a transportation planning process that will contain a number of specific recommendations, this plan contains only a couple general recommendations. These recommendations are based on input received during the planning process for the Comprehensive Plan, as well as the preliminary survey results from the recently conducted survey for the Comprehensive Transportation Plan (CTP) process.

8.3.1 Work with NCDOT, the RPO and the Madison County Transportation Authority (MCTA) to improve public transportation services.

In the community meetings and throughout the planning process, residents voiced the need for additional public transportation services. The ones mentioned most frequently were for regular public transit service between the three towns and regular service between Asheville and Madison County, in the Marshall or Mars Hill area. The County should advocate for these additional services and work with the entities listed above to improve transit service in the county.

8.3.2 Work with NCDOT and the RPO to designate additional park-and-ride lots

The recent transportation survey showed that a majority of respondents would like to see more park-and-ride lots around the county. Currently there is only one official lot and it is along I-26

in Mars Hill. Park-and-ride lots enhance carpooling and in the future, could be used in conjunction with transit routes. They can be established in any parking lot that has excess or unused space and they work best if they are in a convenient location, along or near a main road. There are a number of retail parking lots along US 25-70 that could contain a section for park-and-ride parking. Church parking lots can also be good locations for park-and-ride lots because they are often mostly empty during weekdays. Park-and-ride lots can be managed with simple but formal agreements between NCDOT or another entity – a town, county or transportation authority – and the property owners.

8.3.3 Work with NCDOT to enhance the safety for bicyclists on NC 251, NC 213 and other roads identified in the CTP

Many bicyclists from around the region ride along the scenic stretch of the French Broad River, on NC 251, between Asheville and Marshall. The roadway is two lanes, windy in parts and contains little, if any, shoulders. There are many other scenic roads in Madison County, but aside from a few of the main roads, most are relatively narrow, curvy and do not have wide shoulders. As roads are resurfaced and improved in the County, County officials and staff should encourage NCDOT to make them safer for bicyclists and motorists, by providing wider pavement, hard-packed shoulders and bicycle lanes where feasible.

8.3.4 Consider pursuing scenic byway designation for additional roadways in the County.

To help preserve the scenic beauty and rural character of county roadways, the County should consider pursuing scenic byway designation for additional sections of roads. Some possible road sections to consider are: US 23 from Mars Hill to the County line, to preserve the historic and scenic character and resources along this road; NC 208, in the northwestern side of the county, for its scenic beauty as it winds through the mountains and National Forest.