

Position Paper

Forest Hill Road Neighborhoods

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To put citizen concerns and frustrations regarding the proposed Forest Hill Road (FHR) project in perspective, it is essential to review the history of the Macon/Bibb Road Improvement Program, road planning in the city and county, and planning and public input specific to FHR.

Problems with the project start with the original SPLOST (1994). The campaign for the SPLOST was directed and financed by Moreland Altobelli, Inc. (MAI), the firm who was promised the contract to manage the projects funded by the SPLOST. No public hearings detailing the actual projects and scope thereof included in the SPLOST were conducted (a GDOT official recently learning of the lack of public hearings expressed surprise, as this is not the norm). The SPLOST was sold to the public as “Pennies for Potholes,” a statement that disguised the true intent and scope of the program. The list of projects provided did not include much of an explanation beyond “improvements.” The SPLOST barely passed (by less than 250 votes); as detailed proposals for specific projects were released to the public, concern was expressed regarding numerous projects, including FHR.

Road planning in Bibb County leading up to the Road Improvement Program (RIP) has been piecemeal and episodic. Projects were selected by a handful of non-technical civic leaders (elected and private) guided by political expediency rather than planning or need. Old-fashion “pork barrel” motives (maximizing Federal and State funds spent locally, regardless of actual need or collateral damage to the urban fabric) led to pervasive over design of projects, with little regard for negative impacts. Implementation and control of detail planning for projects was delegated to a private firm, Moreland Altobelli, Inc. (MAI), with limited control by elected officials. MAI, rather than Bibb County or the City of Macon, was given primary responsibility for and control over public presentations and public input. It was apparent to citizens that their input was unwelcome and would for the most part be ignored.

MAI representatives have acknowledged that “after build” reviews are not conducted as a way of verifying project assumptions and projections. Such evidence-based reviews would show that several RIP projects have significant problems. Two examples are Houston Road and Zebulon Road. The Macon/Bibb Planning & Zoning Department substantially reduced traffic projections for Houston Road soon after the project received final approval, as the projections did not support realistic planning for the area. Serious accidents and fatalities have increased on Zebulon Road since its completion; anecdotal accounts from law enforcement officers note clocking speeds of over 90 mph and urban drag racing on Zebulon. Drivers routinely exceed the speed limit in front of a busy elementary school on Zebulon. Serious drainage problems have resulted from several projects.

FHR is classified as a minor arterial, but its primary function is and has historically been as a collector for adjoining neighborhoods. Unfortunately, the current project will greatly diminish FHR’s local utility by barring turning movements from Wimbish south for residents and emergency vehicles. Lack of legal turnabouts will force residents and emergency vehicles to take lengthy, indirect routes, despite the fact that significant through traffic is limited to the morning and evening rush hour. An excessive design speed will make local access much more hazardous to both residents and through traffic.

The FHR project was originally justified as a road to the Macon Mall. It would feed a new “Northwest Parkway” offering a convenient shortcut to the mall from north Macon. The Macon Mall is now on the decline, the Northwest Parkway is no longer under active consideration, but FHR is still projected to handle more than double its current load, despite flat traffic counts for the past 20 years. Vineville Avenue, the primary roadway it feeds, lacks additional capacity (90% of the traffic from southbound FHR will continue on Vineville Avenue according to RIP projections). No plans for expansion of Vineville, which traverses locally valued historic districts, have been approved. Citizens have suggested that this dramatic change in plans and justification should cause the “Needs and Purpose” statement for the project to be revisited and revised –with guarantees of effective public participation.

The projects contained in the Northwest Parkway, including Forest Hill Road, were planned in a segmented fashion (segmentation is prohibited in projects with federal funding, as federal regulations require effective system-wide planning). MAI is very careful to skirt the legal definition of segmentation, but it is clear that the interdependent projects do not have independent utility. The new section of road from Park Street west that was to provide the linkage to the Macon Mall has been moved from the active to the long range section of the Macon Area Transportation Study (MATS) program. Considering today’s funding crisis acknowledged by the Georgia State Department of Transportation (GDOT), it is clear that few if any of the projects in the long range section will be built in the foreseeable future. At the north terminus of the Forest Hill Road project at Northside Drive, FHR continues north as a two-lane road, with no current plans or need for widening or expansion.

Substantive questions about traffic projections, safety data, purpose and need, drainage plans, noise projections, future maintenance and repair costs, and neighborhood integrity have been filed repeatedly at public hearings and through the MATS process. Most of FHR is in the City of Macon (all will be if proposed annexation to Northside Drive is ratified), yet the County and the RIP are making the decisions significantly impacting future City costs and liabilities. When the original SPLOST was proposed, the County claimed that the City delegated its responsibility to the County, yet no City ordinance or resolution is on file. The City has consistently supported the neighborhood’s position and has asked that the project be scaled back.

Traffic projections as presented by MAI are grossly inflated. These projections were made almost 14 years ago and we now have real data from these years that we can compare to the projections. We have provided graphs showing these comparisons (please see Exhibits A and B). The traffic counts and inflated projections do not justify the scale of the project

Rush hour congestion on FHR is due entirely to constraints at the major intersections (Vineville, Ridge, Wimbish and Northside). Intersection improvements, including better turning movements and additional stacking, would redress this problem to the extent possible; these intersections, particularly that with Vineville, will remain *the* constraint on FHR’s carrying capacity. The intersections can, however, be improved at reasonable cost without expansion of the intervening roadway and without sacrificing local utility or the integrity and safety of adjacent neighborhoods. The benefits to improved traffic flow and safety will be equal to that of the proposed project, at a savings to taxpayers of approximately \$30 million dollars.

The proposed design for FHR will significantly increase speed, making it more dangerous to travel and enter the road from adjacent properties. As speed increases in an urban setting, so do the number and severity of accidents. FHR is currently safer than comparable roads in the state (the purpose and need statement overstated accidents by 30% and claimed that the road was more dangerous; our calculations, based on public records, were acknowledged as correct in a letter from Harvey Keepler of GDOT in 2001). Most of the accidents are rear-end collisions without injuries occurring at the intersections. There has been much

discussion about straightening the curves in the road. It is counter-intuitive, but curves actually increase safety by slowing traffic, and are a component of modern traffic-calming techniques. The most dangerous roads in any community are wide and straight, as they encourage drivers to travel at unsafe speeds. As noted above, MAI has admitted that they have never revisited their projects to verify the assumptions about speed or safety in their designs. Zebulon Road project is a prime example of a project that MAI completed that is more dangerous after the “improvements” due to excessive speed.

Streets, churches, schools and residences that enter FHR along the section between Wimbish and Vineville will not be able to make left-hand turns because of the raised median. There are no provisions for safe and legal U-turns. The closing of streets in this section and the inability of residents to access the road to and from both directions will force traffic onto quiet residential streets in an indirect and inconvenient way.

Storm drainage along FHR is currently handled effectively by grassy swales – a method preferred for cost and environmental benefits when viable. The project will increase and accelerate runoff significantly, as both existing and expanded sections of the roadway will be channelized. Downstream costs and impacts have not been adequately addressed (prior RIP projects have caused flooding and lawsuits). When the city engineer pointed out to MAI and its local consultant that the drainage from the project would exceed that allowed by law, MAI elected to skirt the issue by calculating the impact of the runoff against the entire drainage basin instead of the project area. Such slight of hand *will not reduce the City's future liabilities*. At the present time virtually all of the streams in Bibb County, and the Ocmulgee River exceed EPA limits for pollutant loads (called Total Maximum Daily Loads, or TMDLs.); this project will further degrade water quality.

The road as planned will exceed the federal noise limits. Residential frontage precludes effective mitigation measures. The health impacts from an increase in ambient noise are well documented, hence the federal regulations. Property values and quality of life will suffer. Residents have been told that they will have to live with the problem.

There are significant changes planned to the intersection of Northminster and Wimbish. The alignment of the entire road will be changed. A huge detention pond is planned which will require a protective fence and entail inherent liability due to its proximity to a school. Presently the location of the pond is pristine forest that has been lovingly maintained. The realignment will create a hazard for the 60 residents of condominiums located across the street as the increase in speed will make access and egress from their neighborhood dangerous.

FHR is one of Macon's signature urban/rural roadways. These include FHR, Wimbish, Wesleyan, and Rivoli in north Macon. Such roadways are assets to the entire urban area, while efficiently handling traffic demands. Similar roadways are valued and protected in Atlanta (witness West Paces Ferry Road in Atlanta, which carries twice the traffic projected for FHR on two lane sections with efficient intersections). Examples such as West Paces Ferry Road should be the model for FHR, as such context-sensitive designs are proven to serve local and through traffic safely while protecting aesthetics, quality of life, and safety. Such a sensible approach offers immediate and long-term financial benefits to the local community, while protecting the integrity of adjacent neighborhoods. These concerns have been repeatedly expressed by citizens since the inception of the road program.

Citizens have formulated “design criteria and constraints” that we believe should guide design of the FHR Project and mediation, and which address the neighborhoods' primary concerns – footprint, speed, access, neighborhood integrity, and drainage:

- Protect the integrity and livability of neighborhoods fronting and served by Forest Hill Road.

- Recognize Forest Hill Road as one of Macon's premiere scenic residential roadways, and protect that asset.
- Provide for the safety of motorists, pedestrians and school children.
- Provide safe and convenience access to adjacent businesses, churches, schools, and residential areas.
- Provide unimpeded access by public safety vehicles.
- Minimize on-going maintenance and operations costs by the City of Macon and Bibb County, to include traffic control, storm drainage and policing costs.
- Use modern traffic-calming and neighborhood-sensitive design techniques to further the all of above.
- Employ a design speed of 35mph.
- Minimize the footprint of the roadway and construction zone to preserve the existing landscaping and tree cover, and to avoid the expense and disruption of relocating utility lines and poles and channelizing storm drainage.
- Recognize that the current Statement of Need is outdated, and adopt a new one that realistically reflects current and future needs and traffic volumes.
- Thoroughly study the effect of induced traffic volumes on Vineville/Forsyth, Ridge, and Park Street; delay construction if increased volume will require expansion of those roadways that is unmanageable, unacceptable, or not contained in approved projects scheduled for completion in the immediate future.
- Protect the historic resources at Park Street, the Prado and the residences along FHR.

The plans for FHR have been vigorously and overwhelmingly opposed since they were revealed, and the concerns outlined above repeatedly voiced. Each official public presentation has been attended by hundreds of people (these were not conducted as formal public hearings allowing participants to share concerns or express a consensus). Discussion has been hampered by MAI's refusal to release current plans to the public, a problem we continued to experience in preparing for mediation. The City of Macon (the most recent of three resolutions was adopted on February 19th, 2008) and the Macon Area Transportation System's Citizen Advisory Committee have supported and echoed residents' concerns for an appropriate, scaled-back design. All have been ignored.

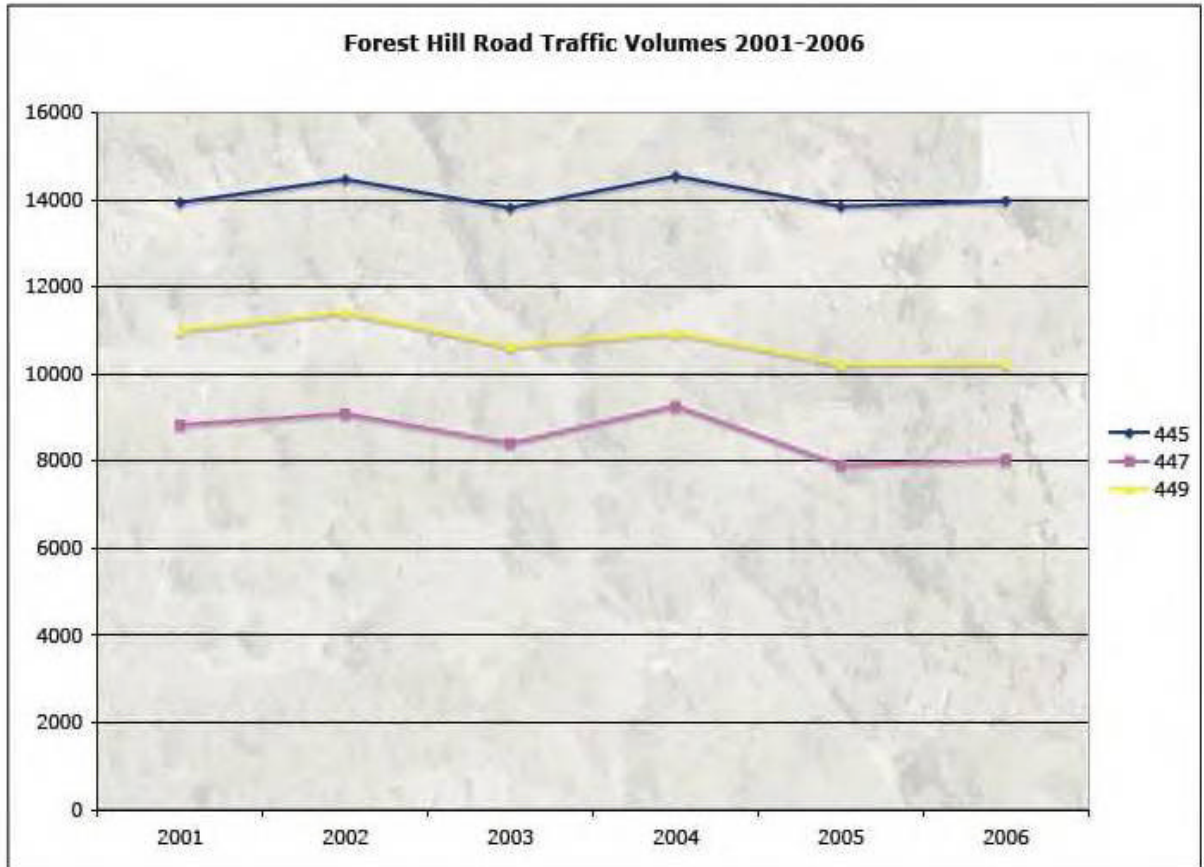
The RIP, County Commission and MAI have consistently claimed money spent to date on design as justification for refusing to modify the plan. However, the design process proceeded without adequate citizen involvement and with clear knowledge that substantive concerns about the project had not been resolved. It is illogical to proceed with an excessively costly and damaging project on the basis of premature design and engineering, much of which would be used in a redesign. The significant cost of the project is in its construction, not design; it is foolish to throw good taxpayer's money after the bad on an improperly designed project.

A plan that would be acceptable to the neighborhood is as follows:

From Northside Avenue to Ridge: maintain a two-lane roadway, with roundabouts or dedicated turn lanes as necessary (So. Forest Lake Drive and Newport Road, Old Lundy and Lokchappe Drive, and Wimbish). A multi-use path (pedestrian and bicycle) on one side of the road and separated from it would be welcome. Maintain drainage in grassy swales to minimize runoff and preclude the need for retention/detention facilities. Minimize removal of trees.

From Ridge to Vineville: additional stacking and turn lanes. Improvements in this segment are most critical to reducing rush hour congestion and delays.

Exhibit A



Source: Ga DOT

TND Engineering

Exhibit B

Forest Hill Road DOT Traffic Projections vs. Actual Volumes; 3 Locations

