

Introduction

A brief summary of the purpose and scope of the BIG Picture comprehensive planning initiative was presented by Dennis Madsen, Manager of Urban and Long Range Planning. It was noted that addressing transportation issues will be an important part of the effort. As a result, the transportation focus group was established to provide an opportunity for dialogue and input with local citizens on these issues.

Significant Transportation Issues

To begin the discussion, each attendee was asked to state briefly what they considered to be the most important transportation issue facing the Huntsville community. The responses included the following issues:

1. The need for alternative modes of transportation
2. Co-location of land uses and facilities
3. Affordable local and regional public transit system
4. Appropriately sized streets and sustainability of our roadway infrastructure
5. Growth and its impact on our transportation infrastructure
6. Need for updated engineering design standards which accommodate multi-modal transportation options and encourage better parking facility designs
7. Lack of walkability
8. Narrow roads with trees and deep ditches located too close to the road
9. Connectivity
10. Planning for public transit

Current Transit System Deficiencies

Participants were asked to list the problems or challenges which impact the effectiveness and limit the use of Huntsville's current transit system. The responses included the following issues:

1. Bus frequency and timing isn't convenient for typical work schedules
2. One hour wait times for buses are too long
3. The large geographic area of the city relative to our population makes it difficult to design an efficient system
4. The city's sprawling residential development patterns are difficult to serve
5. The system doesn't serve the airport
6. Transit stops lack supporting pedestrian infrastructure
7. Limited evening hours of operation particularly impact low income and aging residents

Recommendations

The following ideas and suggestions for addressing various transportation issues in the community were noted:

A. City Regulations

1. Regulations should be updated to encourage transit oriented development
2. Codes should be amended to require that buildings be brought close to the street with parking in the rear

B. Pilot Projects

1. Initiate pilot multi-modal projects on corridors such as Holmes Avenue
2. Use Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and similar tools to fund pilot projects
3. Consider Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) rather than more expensive modes as an appropriate option for Huntsville

C. Allocation of Roadway Space

1. Revisit the allocation of road space between various modes; currently cars have the priority on almost all of our streets
2. Develop a comprehensive ranking of streets to determine priority users and appropriate design changes
3. Consider Copenhagen as a good model for allocating space to various modes
4. Reversible lanes should be considered along appropriate corridors

D. Downtown parking

1. Install new meters which accept alternate payment methods
2. Consider removing all parking meters
3. Most attendees agree that there is sufficient parking downtown

General Comments and Insights

A. Speed and Safety

1. Speed is the number one predictor of accident severity
2. Raised intersections will help slow traffic and reduce accidents at key locations
3. Trees in medians and between the street and sidewalk provide "visual cues" to help slow traffic

B. Traditional Car Culture

1. Our traditional car culture presents a challenge as we plan for multiple modes of transportation
2. Cars will continue to be an important transportation option. We need to consider how to make them more sustainable
3. Need more carpooling and related park and ride lots
4. Need to educate the general public regarding rules relating to sharing the road with other modes of transportation

C. Connectivity

1. Need more connectivity to address the complaint that people often have to drive to reach places to bike or walk
2. Walkability in Huntsville is diminished due to the number of unconnected sidewalk segments
3. Co-mingling of uses is needed in all types of development
4. We should improve pedestrian infrastructure *before* initiating transit improvements

D. Parking

1. Local parking regulations require too many spaces and are not conducive to good urban design
2. Our regulations should encourage, rather than discourage, cooperative agreements and shared parking

E. The Process

The comprehensive planning effort will have failed if it results only in general policies and does not result in specific guidelines that are implementable by City staff and understandable to developers

Post-Meeting Comments

1. Regional rail system could be expanded to the Shoals
2. Sync traffic lights for peak- and off-peak travel periods
3. Partner with major employers to increase transit options
4. Coordinate with state and other local governments to come up with a Snow Emergency plan
5. Bicycles should have a separated right-of-way from cars for safety reasons
6. More north-south corridors should be developed (e.g. Jordan Lane/Patton Rd.) as alternate routes in peak-hour and emergency situations