

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Catawba Crossings is a proposed 6.8-mile new location boulevard between NC 279 (S. New Hope Road) in southeastern Gaston County to NC 160 (Steele Creek Road) in western Mecklenburg County, just south of the Charlotte Douglas International Airport (CLT). The proposed Catawba Crossings includes new bridges over the South Fork Catawba River and Catawba River (collectively impounded in Lake Wylie) and a new, or expanded, interchange with I-485 south of the existing West Boulevard interchange.



Figure 1. Catawba Crossings Corridor

RAISE Funding is being requested to complete the Environmental Document for the Catawba Crossings Project.

## CATAWBA CROSSINGS ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENT

While funding has not yet been identified for the construction of the Catawba Crossings Project, the utilization of federal funding, federal permits, and/or federal authorizations are likely. Therefore, it is highly reasonable to assume that this Project will be advanced through a rigorous planning and design process that meets the statutory requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other applicable federal, state, and local environmental laws and regulations.

The completion of an environmental document for the Project will ensure that potential impacts to the social and natural environment are considered as well as the transportation needs of the public in reaching a decision that is in the best overall public interest.

The following tasks will be included in the Environmental Document phase of the project:

- NEPA Scoping and Purpose and Need
- Alternatives Analysis
- Data Collection
- Draft Environmental Impact Report
- Final Environmental Impact Report

An Environmental Impact Report (EIR) will be prepared in the absence of a lead federal agency. In the absence of a lead federal agency, certain NEPA actions will not be appropriate (e.g., Notice of Intent (NOI) and Record of Decision (ROD)). The scope and thoroughness of the EIR will fulfill

the standards of a NEPA Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). As the project progresses, it will be the lead federal agency's role to confirm a preferred alternative in a ROD and the USACE's role to determine a Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternative (LEDPA).

### TRANSPORTATION CHALLENGES

The Catawba River creates a natural barrier to mobility between Mecklenburg County to the east and Gaston and York counties to the west. There are currently five bridges connecting Gaston and York counties to Mecklenburg County (NC 16, NC 27, I-85, and US 29/74 in Gaston County and Hwy 49 in York County). The four bridge crossings in Gaston County are located approximately one to four miles apart. The bridge crossing in York County (Hwy 49) is located approximately 10 miles from the closest bridge crossing in Gaston County (US 29/74).



Figure 2. Existing Bridge Crossings

South of I-85 in Gaston County, the lack of continuous east-west roadways makes travel circuitous and limits mobility. The limited inter-county connections force drivers with origins/destinations in southern Gaston and northern York (SC) counties traveling to and from Mecklenburg County to cross the Catawba River via I-85, US 29/74, or Hwy 49, each of which provide critical regional, intrastate, and interstate connections. As a result, the I-85, US 29/74, and Hwy 49 corridors experience overcapacity conditions by being forced to combine traffic streams to serve much of the local, regional, and interstate traffic crossing the Catawba River leading to increased congestion and safety concerns. The limited east-west connectivity also contributes to congestion and safety concerns on the primary north-south arterials serving the area (e.g., NC 273 and NC 279) because all east-west trips in the area must use these routes to access one of the existing crossings of the Catawba River identified above.

The nature of the existing transportation network places incredible pressure on critical regional, intrastate, and interstate facilities. High crash frequencies on I-85 contribute to unexpected delays on the interstate facility. During such incidents, interstate traffic commonly reroutes to avoid the traffic incident and exacerbates normal congestion conditions on US 29/74. As a result, travel time reliability for I-85 and US 29/74 are closely aligned and eroded daily. Because these two close parallel routes (US 29/74 and I-85) serve the basic function to provide connectivity between Gaston and Mecklenburg counties and because they accept traffic from the other due to incidents, US 29/74 and I-85 tend to function as a single thoroughfare.

Western Mecklenburg, southern Gaston, and northern York counties are currently experiencing significant growth with increasing growth pressures anticipated in the coming years. This will

increase the local traffic in these areas and create additional stress on the existing transportation networks within the region.

The combination of existing transportation deficiencies and future development anticipated in the region produces a significant need for additional mobility options in the area. Options that will improve the vitality and resiliency of the regional transportation network, offer mobility choices, and enhance the quality of life for residents and users in the area.

Creating a new crossing over the Catawba River between US 29/74 and Hwy 49 is expected to provide regional travel benefits including enhancing connectivity, accessibility, and mobility between Gaston, Mecklenburg, and York counties, while also improving equitable access to employment (e.g., CLT and job centers in western Mecklenburg County), medical, educational, and recreational opportunities in each county. An additional crossing will reduce traffic volumes and congestion on some of the existing area transportation corridors, improve the capacity and throughput of freight and long-distance intrastate travel for motorists, while also increasing their longevity and reliability and improving safety.

## PROJECT HISTORY

For many years, regional discussions have taken place regarding the need to provide additional east-west transportation capacity by way of additional bridge crossings of the South Fork of the Catawba River and the Catawba River between southeastern Gaston County and western Mecklenburg County. These discussions originated in the late 1980's. Between 1989 and 1991 the Gaston Urban Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (GUAMPO) (now known as GCLMPO or Gaston Cleveland Lincoln Metropolitan Planning Organization) conducted a citizen participation process to gather input on the need for improved east-west mobility. GUAMPO hosted five citizen workshops, six public meetings, and 13 formal public hearings before adopting the Gaston Urban Area Thoroughfare Plan in 1991. The corridor now known as the Catawba Crossings was locally named the US 321/74 Bypass at that time. In 1994, the Mecklenburg-Union MPO (MUMPO) (now known as CRTPO or Charlotte Regional Transportation Planning Organization) adopted a conceptual regional thoroughfare plan that also included the US 321/74 Bypass. The North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) began environmental studies for this corridor in 2001 under the name Gaston East-West Connector.

### Gaston East-West Connector

The Gaston East-West Connector Project (aka Garden Parkway) was placed in NCDOT's Section 404/NEPA Merger Process in 2001. The Section 404/NEPA Merger Team included the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), NCDOT, GUAMPO, MUMPO, USACE, US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), NC Department of Environment and Natural Resources-Division of Water Quality (DWQ), State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), and the NC Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC).

The Garden Parkway screened approximately 116 miles of corridor (1,200-foot wide) between I-85 in Gaston County (west of Gastonia) to I-485 in Mecklenburg County with input from the public

and resource and regulatory agencies in 2003. This screening eliminated approximately 44 miles and advanced approximately 72 miles of functional design corridors (1,400-foot wide) that could be pieced together in 90 possible endpoint-to-endpoint combinations (I-85 to I-485). The public was involved in the decision-making process and narrowing of Detailed Study Alternatives (DSAs) at six public involvement opportunities between 2003 and 2006. Based on estimated environmental impacts, engineering considerations, and input from local, state, and federal resource and regulatory agencies, 16 DSAs were presented to the public in 2006. Four DSAs were eliminated due to unavoidable interference with critical operations at Duke Energy’s Allen Steam Plant.

North Carolina Turnpike Authority (NCTA) involvement began in 2005. NCTA and the FHWA published the NEPA-required Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the proposed Garden Parkway in April 2009 for public review and comment. Twelve new-location alternatives and a No-Build Alternative were analyzed in detail in the DEIS. DSA 9, which spanned 21.9-miles from I-85 in Gaston County to I-485 in Mecklenburg County, was recommended as the Preferred Alternative. DSA 9, a controlled access, tolled freeway, included the crossings of the South Fork Catawba River and Catawba River.

On December 21, 2010, the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) was published. The NEPA-required Record of Decision (ROD) followed on March 9, 2012 and affirmed the NCTA/FHWA decision to advance DSA 9 as the Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternative (LEDPA) and Preferred Alternative for the proposed Garden Parkway. The NCTA submitted the USACE Section 404 CWA permit application on March 20, 2012 and, in accordance with regulation, the USACE issued a “Public Notice” for the Garden Parkway on April 12, 2012. During the “Public Notice” period, USACE received comments and requests from the USEPA, Southern Environmental Law Center (SELC), and property owners adjacent to the proposed Garden Parkway project to deny any CWA permits due to potential unresolved issues in the FEIS/ROD for the Garden Parkway project.

Though the NCTA and FHWA discontinued the Garden Parkway in 2015, local municipalities and jurisdictions continue to acknowledge the need for an additional South Fork and Catawba River crossing in local transportation plans and have retained the DSA 9 alignment in those plans. Local land use planning relies on these transportation plans to inform development permitting decisions and the DSA 9 alignment has since been identified in approved local development plans.

### **Catawba Crossings Feasibility Study**

Although the Garden Parkway was discontinued in 2015, regional discussions about the need to provide additional east-west transportation capacity by way of additional bridge crossings of the South Fork of the Catawba River and the Catawba River between southeastern Gaston County and western Mecklenburg County have been continuously ongoing.

The ***Catawba Crossings Feasibility Study*** ([Attachment 10](#)) was completed in August 2022 with the purpose to describe the proposed project, including cost, analyze existing and future traffic conditions, evaluate design options, inform the public and stakeholders of the Project, receive

public and stakeholder feedback, and identify potential issues that may require consideration in subsequent planning and design phases. The Feasibility Study was the initial step in the planning and design process for Catawba Crossings and was not the product of exhaustive environmental or design investigations.

### PROJECT LOCATION

The Catawba Crossings Project is located in Gaston and Mecklenburg counties in North Carolina, which is in the Southeastern United States and in the southern Piedmont region of North Carolina. This project is defined as rural, with only a small segment of the project located within the Gastonia NC–SC Urbanized Area, which has a population less than 200,000. The majority of the project is located outside of an Urbanized Area.



A Project Location File is included as **Attachment 3**. A detailed map of the project has also been included as **Attachment 11**.

As shown below, the Catawba Crossings Project is located in Census Tracts 324.02 and 325.02 in Gaston County, and Census Tract 59.06 in Mecklenburg County. Census Tract 59.06 is identified as a **Historically Disadvantaged Community**.

Census Tract	Length of Project	Percentage of Project	Area of Persistent Poverty	Historically Disadvantaged Community
325.02	1.01 mi	14.9%	No	No
324.02	2.44 mi	36.0%	No	No
59.06	3.33 mi	49.1%	No	Yes

