

MEMO

TO: Keith Hickey, Town Manager
FROM: Karen White, Planning Director
DATE: December 15, 2005
RE: Additional Traffic Signals on Route 101

Between 1979 and 2005, the Town and School District of Bedford has invested more than \$800,000 in planning and engineering studies to prepare for the growth of traffic and land development along Route 101. Since Route 101 functions both as the State's major east-west highway and as Bedford's Main Street, the residents of our community have always taken an intensely personal interest in the future of this highway corridor. This intense concern by citizens was evident during the Flatley commercial proposal at Constitution Drive, development of the Atwood Marketplace on Wallace Road, and the current proposal for a Hannaford grocery store and traffic signal at Jenkins Road. Every commuter in Bedford is familiar with the devastating consequences of poor community planning that allowed unrestricted traffic signals to create gridlock traffic jams in North Conway and on Route 101A in Nashua, Merrimack, and Amherst.

Looking back at the previous Bedford studies of Route 101 – all of which were prepared with involvement by large numbers of Bedford residents and business owners – it is obvious that the “quick fix” of additional traffic signals has been eschewed in favor of careful access management strategies and limiting the size of new commercial developments. The citizens of Bedford have never been supportive of traffic signals at Chestnut Drive or Nashua Road, as demonstrated by the numerous studies prepared over the years. Those studies are highlighted below:

- **1962-63 Master Plan** – Recommended building a new 4-lane limited access Route 101 highway that would be parallel with and just to the south of the existing highway. No intersections with side streets and no traffic signals were proposed. Nashua Road, Meetinghouse Road, and Old Bedford Road would have passed under the proposed highway. Existing Route 101 would become a local service road. An alternate/relocation of Route 101 through south Bedford to connect to the F.E. Everett Turnpike was also suggested by citizens.
- **1979-80 Master Plan** - No relocation of Route 101 had occurred, so the master plan recommended selective widening of Route 101 and future signalization at Wallace Road and Meetinghouse Road to slow and “pulse” traffic and provide two means for vehicles to cross Route 101 from north to south. A new “Town Center” along Route 101 was proposed with a pedestrian trail that would cross under Route 101 at Nashua Road.

- **1989 Route 101 Corridor Study** – Recommended strong measures to reduce the existing curb cuts on Route 101 to a future limit of 21 curb cuts. The Study recommended that local roads be prohibited from connecting directly to Route 101. Bell Hill Road would become a cul-de-sac off of Route 101 to prevent access to and from the Town Center to Route 101, and Bedford Center Road and Shaw Drive would be disconnected from Route 101. A future traffic signal was again recommended at Wallace Road, as well as upgrades for the signal at Meetinghouse Road. While the Study speculated that at some future time, traffic growth might require signalization at Jenkins Road and Joppa Hill Road, the report states that “Clearly, a proliferation of traffic signals along the Route 101 corridor would not be consistent with the ‘movement’ function of Route 101.” During the public participation process, developer Charlie Twigg proposed a traffic signal at Constitution Drive. This signal proposal was not included in the final recommendations (the NH D.O.T. later installed a traffic signal at Constitution Drive and re-aligned Old Bedford Road as a 4-way intersection when the Route 114 intersection was widened).
- **1990 Master Plan** – Due to increasing traffic, this master plan recommended preparing a feasibility study to once again consider building a Route 101 by-pass along the southern border of Bedford that would connect to the F.E. Everett Turnpike. The plan noted that residents must use and cross Route 101 for daily activities, and that crossing the highway has become extremely hazardous for pedestrians and bicycles. The master plan also recommended that the Planning Board prohibit the creation of any new commercial zones along Route 101 until such time as the highway system could accommodate the increased commercial traffic (the Planning Board did “take the pledge” and consistently recommended disapproval of all re-zoning proposals submitted for Route 101). No new traffic signals were proposed in this plan.
- **1993 Bedford Long-Range Hike and Bike Plan** – Prepared by the Bedford Land Trust and Bedford Planning Department for inclusion in the Regional Pedestrian and Bicycle Plan for the Southern NH Planning Commission area as part of the State of NH Long-Range Pedestrian and Bicycle Plan. The plan observed that a safe pedestrian/bicycle route for children is needed to link the Library, the Little League fields, Riley Field, McKelvie School, and Peter Woodbury School. Designs for both a culvert underpass and a pedestrian overpass were considered. “Since the Town Council has requested improvements to the Nashua Road/Route 101 intersection, this crossing might be planned as part of future improvements by the State D.O.T.”
- **1994** – Bedford Land Trust makes presentation to Town Council in March of 1994 requesting a pedestrian culvert underpass be constructed at the intersection of Bell Hill Road/Nashua Road with Route 101. Bedford Police Chief objects to culvert design. Local resident and designer Leo Urban provides a new “arched underpass” schematic. In June, 1994, Town Council directs the Town Planner to request that the NH D.O.T. make safety improvements at Bell Hill Road and Nashua Road due to misalignment with Route 101 and also create a separated-grade pedestrian crossing. Assistant Commissioner Leon Kenison sends a written reply stating that these improvements are of a greater magnitude than typical safety improvements and should be included in the State’s 10-Year Highway Plan.

- **1997** – D.O.T. Project Director Robert Greer writes to SNHPC Director Moni Sharma stating that the D.O.T. will support the inclusion of widening Route 101 from Constitution Drive to Wallace Road in the 10-Year Highway Plan. Engineer and Bedford resident Jim Lamp designs a new pedestrian bridge and cross-section for the Bell Hill Road/Nashua Road crossing.
- **2000 Master Plan** – The topic that generated the most citizen discussion during the visioning/charrette process was the negative impact that Route 101 has on how Bedford functions as a community. The highway was viewed as a wedge that divides the town in half, both physically and socially. Residents wanted to create a “village center” on Route 101 and they prepared numerous sketches of pedestrian bridges and tunnels as ideas for providing a safe crossing point to link the two sides of the new village center. Residents also demanded landscaping improvements if Route 101 was to be widened, citing the visual blight created when the Wallace Road intersection was signalized by the D.O.T. The master plan recommended that a new Route 101 corridor study be prepared, with focus on the possibility of a Route 101 bypass, grade-separated crossings of the highway, the possibility of depressing a portion of Route 101 (the little Dig), and highway landscaping improvements.
- **2002 Route 101 Corridor Study** – Town Council selected a committee of 30 residents and business owners along Route 101 to participate in this 2-year project. Study found that a Route 101 by-pass was no longer feasible due to the amount of land development that had occurred. Recommendations included widening Route 101 to 4 lanes, a landscaped center median between Meetinghouse Road and Wallace Road to give a “village center” identity and prevent unprotected left turns from the numerous commercial driveways, a pedestrian and local traffic overpass at Nashua/Bell Hill Road, and future traffic signals only at Jenkins Road and Joppa Hill Road. When Amherst, Milford, and Wilton joined the corridor study, these towns objected to any new traffic signals in the regional corridor. There was final consensus that Bedford would not recommend any additional traffic signals other than Jenkins and Joppa Hill. Instead, a “connector road” was proposed to link Wallace Road to Nashua Road as an access management tool to facilitate egress from businesses where left-turns would be prohibited and to provide a route to a traffic signal for motorists on Nashua Road. (The final presentation of the Corridor Study at McKelvie School was attended by approximately 125 people. The only change demanded by the audience was relocating the proposed connector road from the old Class VI portion of County Road to a location nearer Route 101.)
- **2005 Traffic Impact Assessment for High School/Middle School** – This study found that a second means of access to the new school complex (in addition to Nashua Road) would be necessary for acceptable traffic movement. The study recommended that the new connector road to Wallace Road be constructed “...as soon as possible and prior to opening of the schools. The connector road provides a key role in access management plan and is badly needed today”. The Traffic Study Subcommittee of the School District recommended that the connector road be located along the northerly side of the proposed school. The report stated that if the connector road was not built prior to opening of the schools, then costly interim improvements might have to be made to Route 101, including the possibility of an emergency traffic signal at Nashua Road which would have to be removed later.

In summary, I urge the Town Council to resist the temptation of a "quick fix" for the traffic problems that will be generated by the construction of the new schools. Route 101 currently carries a daily volume of 28,000 cars per day, and this volume of traffic will continue to grow over the next few decades. While Route 101 can be widened to 4 lanes within the existing right-of-way, any additional widening for more lanes would require massive condemnation of homes and businesses along the corridor. We must carefully protect and preserve the highway corridor. Chestnut Drive is only 750 feet from the signal at Wallace Road, and Nashua Road is only 1,200 feet from the signal at Meetinghouse Road. Installation of traffic signals at either of these locations will lead to future gridlock on Route 101 as the volume increases and cars are unable to move through the signals. This is the current problem at Meetinghouse Road, where there is only 1 single lane in each direction.

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