

MANDATORY REFERRAL REPORT NO. 04-05
Proposed acquisition of land in Huntersville to serve as a Park & Ride Facility for CATS

PROJECT PROPOSAL AND LOCATION:

Charlotte Area Transit System (CATS) is seeking approval to acquire approximately 4.79 acres of land in Huntersville west of I-77 for a Park & Ride facility. The facility will serve commuters in the Huntersville area and those from areas of north Mecklenburg County. The parcel (PID # 005-052-02) is currently occupied by a single residential structure and is located along Northcross Road in Huntersville, and is bounded by Northcross Road on the west and I-77 on the east. The parcel carries an NR (Neighborhood Residential) zoning classification in the Huntersville zoning ordinance.

The proposed Park & Ride facility is situated near residential and commercial developments, while also having proximity to major thoroughfares, such as Statesville Road (Hwy. 21), Old Statesville Road (Hwy. 115) I-77 and Sam Furr Road (Hwy. 73). It is near exit 25 to I-77.

PROJECT JUSTIFICATION:

CATS has an ambitious capital program to serve existing passengers and to attract new riders. Owning commuter parking provides stability and reliability for riders, and allows marketing of innovative express and custom bus services. There is high demand for park and ride in the subject area. There is currently a month-to-month parking agreement for CATS riders at the Northcross Shopping Center [the location of a Target store, etc.] on Statesville Road at Sam Furr Road, but this provides no guaranteed dependability for CATS commuters and does not provide the easy access for buses and riders that the proposed lot offers. (The proposed lot provides better access for buses and riders in that it will be guaranteed and dependable, which means, not subject to termination. Additionally, it takes significant amounts of time to cycle through the lot at the Northcross center, especially at peak times, with all of the other traffic in the center's lot.) The current parking agreement only allows for 50 cars, and CATS is apparently exceeding this by more than three times. Some stores in the center have banned park and ride cars from their proximities and have placed "will tow" notes on cars. These types of activities typically precede the end of such month-to-month agreements. If the status quo is maintained, which CATS maintains it cannot be, CATS runs a very great risk of alienating a solid customer base by not being able to provide a reliable and dependable service.

CATS Park and Ride Capital Program Site Needs and Criteria, 2002, identifies the area north of Sam Furr Road at I-77 as having the highest number of 2010 projected bus transit trips within the entire system. The proposed site is centrally located within this area and will provide a balance of "east side/west side of I-77" dynamics, as the Exit 23 lot is on the east side, and the proposed lot at Exit 25 is on the west side. In the proposed scenario, the end result is one CATS owned and controlled lot on each side, on the east at 23 and on the west at 25. CATS believes the proposed site is more proximate to a much larger and more dense population center west of I-77, thereby providing them better access to park and ride services, and a greater potential to increase ridership, as well as opportunities to gain walk-ups from nearby apartment complexes and subdivisions.

This project is funded by a separate park and ride line-item in the CATS adopted budget. It has no direct relationship to studies and evaluations under way involving north corridor rapid transit such as commuter rail, other than it provides necessary components of a complete transit system. This park and ride lot program is intended to respond to immediate (current) needs of current CATS customers and services, such as express bus services. These small, community-scaled park and ride facilities will continue to provide travel options to commuters in the future, regardless of the timing of rapid transit services in the area. Bus service will continue to be a part of the transit service scenario. Should, in the unlikely event the site eventually become obsolete or replaced by other sites or services in the distant future, the low level of development characterized by a parking lot and the highly desirable location the site offers will provide for ready marketability of the subject parcel.

The process that led to selection of the Northcross site for the Park & Ride lot involved the following steps:

- Following the guidelines and criteria listed in the *Site Selection Policy Guidelines* below, all vacant or for-sale properties were investigated within a one-mile radius of the Exit 25 Interchange.
- Due diligence research, preliminary engineering, and discussions with Huntersville planning staff were conducted regarding three possible sites that met the criteria.
- The Northcross property purchase option was exercised and design for a 333-car Northcross Park and Ride lot is now underway.
- The new Lot would replace the Target lot now used by 77X riders.

CONSISTENCY WITH ADOPTED PUBLIC POLICIES:

In 2002 CATS completed a Park & Ride Policy study that identified the following policies and prioritized the need for CATS'-owned park & ride lots in the I-77 corridor. The resulting *CATS Park & Ride Lot Site Selection Policy Guidelines* establish the following criteria to guide location of future Park & Ride facilities:

- Accessibility to Uptown Charlotte.

- Proximity to the selected transit corridor.
- Planned improvements that could improve access to the site in the future.
- Site must be easily accessible for both commuters and transit vehicles.
- When access to the site is available from major arterials there is no need for lot access/egress traffic to traverse neighborhoods.
- Suitable sites will have opportunities for access/egress directly from arterials or on collector streets but close to an arterial cross street.

CONSISTENCY WITH ADOPTED LAND USE PLANS:

The property is zoned NR in the Huntersville zoning ordinance. The proposed use is considered “off-street parking”, which is allowed as a conditional use in the NR district.

Huntersville does not have a specific comprehensive land use policy plan relying instead upon the allowable land uses in the zoning ordinance to shape future development. The town expects to begin an area plan for the I-77/US 21 area this spring or summer, which will include recommendations for land use and transportation, including public transit.

PROJECT IMPACT:

CATS staff commented that “with a convenient location along I-77, near the Sam Furr Road intersection, the proposed site is well situated to attract bus commuters in the Huntersville/Northern Mecklenburg County corridor. Increased ridership will serve to ease traffic congestion as well as diminish increases in air pollution. The Park & Ride location itself will be a parking area and transportation hub, which will mesh seamlessly with the surrounding commercial and residential development.”

Huntersville planning staff provided the following information regarding the subject site: *Current* access to the site is poor from the west side of I-77, and worse from east of I-77 due to lack of roadway connectivity and connectivity to surrounding development (notably Birkdale Village, which is very close as the crow flies, but currently only accessible via Sam Furr Road) and potential customers to park & ride. There is very limited current development (employment or residential) that can access the site directly from Northcross Drive. Most access will have to be from Sam Furr Road in the near term. The traffic signal at NC 73 and Northcross Drive will help bus drivers and park-n-ride customers access the site in the near term.

Huntersville staff maintain that access to the site will be enhanced in the long term if:

- Cornelius and Huntersville connect Northcross Drive to Westmoreland Road (minor thoroughfare)
- Huntersville connects Northcross Executive Park to Birkdale Village via a bridge over McDowell Creek (no funding is currently identified for this project).

It should be noted that Huntersville Planning staff have not objected to the purchase of the subject site for use as a park-n-ride lot. They have provided pro and con information for each site proposed during the site selection process.

RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER PUBLIC OR PRIVATE PROJECTS:

There are numerous single-family and relatively high-density multi-family residential developments in this general area as well as high density commercial (Birkdale Village). There are also a large number of recent commercial developments built around Exit 25 and the intersection of Sam Furr Road and Statesville Road.

Northcross Drive is proposed on the Thoroughfare Plan to extend to Westmoreland Rd. No funding for this road extension is identified in the current Long Range Transportation Plan.

The site is within the North Transit Corridor. The Transit System Plan approved by the Metropolitan Transit Commission (MTC) in November 2002 proposes “Enhanced Bus Service” along I-77 in this corridor and commuter rail in existing rail right-of-way along NC 115. The System Plan anticipates that the future bus transit service will be most convenient to commuters west of I-77 and that the rail service will be most convenient to commuters and destinations on the east side of I-77. The EIS stage of the North Corridor transit planning is expected to begin later this year. Recommended future transit station areas should be identified within by mid-2005.

ESTIMATED PROJECT COMPLETION DATE:

The property should be acquired within the next 60-90 days. CATS estimates the park-n-ride facility will be completed by summer 2005.

JOINT USE TASK FORCE REVIEW COMMENTS:

The matter was discussed at the March 3, 2004 Joint Use Task Force meeting, during which representatives from the Town of Cornelius expressed the town’s opinion that the lot should be further west at Sam Furr and NC73 adjoining the

closed down movie theatre. No specific joint use opportunity comments were offered, other than that Cornelius is advocating with the Arts and Science Council to convert the old movie theatre building to a cultural center, and that a park & ride location at this location could serve as the cultural center's parking lot during non-business hours.

CMPC STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends approval of the proposed land acquisition as it is consistent with the current zoning and land use policies of the Town of Huntersville.

CMPC PLANNING COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION:

At its April 5, 2004 meeting, the Planning Committee approved the staff recommendation by a 5-0 vote.

MR 04-05

