

# I-26 Widening & Blue Ridge Parkway Bridge Project

## COMMUNICATIONS GUIDANCE

### GUIDELINES

- This guidance is for use by BLRI staff and partners and should serve as a guide for responses to questions from the public in the course of other normal interactions. This document is not intended for distribution.
- ALL media questions related to this project should be referred to BLRI Superintendent's Office, Public Affairs.

### KEY MESSAGES:

- Work is underway on a project to widen approximately 16.9 miles of I-26 from U.S. 64, in Hendersonville, to Brevard Road, in Asheville, NC. **The widening of I-26 requires the installation of a new bridge on the Blue Ridge Parkway** over the interstate at interstate mile marker 36 (near Parkway Milepost 391).
- Officials from NCDOT, the Federal Highway Administration, U.S. Department of the Interior and the Blue Ridge Parkway have worked in partnership to plan and design the new bridge and then remove the existing structure.
- This plan allows **the Parkway to remain open to the greatest extent possible during construction**. The current bridge will remain open while the new bridge is constructed. The old bridge will not be removed until the new bridge is open.
- The Parkway bridge project is expected to take approximately three years. Completion date according to NCDOT for the entire widening project is 2024.

### ADDITIONAL MESSAGE POINTS:

- Construction will require significant clearing of existing forest and earth moving. Construction of the new bridge also requires realigning approximately 3000 linear feet of Parkway.
- It is very likely that conditions will be similar to those that were present during original construction of the Parkway.\*
- Beginning in February of 2020, the NCDOT contractor will create a small construction-only access route from the shoulder of I-26 up the hill to the Parkway. Crews will begin with the clearing and grading, then build the new structure from the bottom up, by placing beams and pre-constructed bridge segments across the interstate, placing the deck, and preparing the new bridge for traffic.
- Restrictions have been established for truck travel on the parkway related to the project; and boundaries have been placed on areas where the contractor may work and limits have been placed on vegetation removal.
- A new parking area will be constructed at the north end of the new bridge. This new paved pull-off will accommodate eight vehicles and help the Parkway address erosion issues related to informal parking that occurs on the road shoulder near the north end of the bridge. The new parking area will also provide access to the Mountains to Sea Trail (MST).
- The new bridge will use a similar construction to the Linn Cove Viaduct. The bridge will be a "segmental concrete box structure."
- More information about the Parkway bridge project is available at <https://www.ncdot.gov/projects/i-26-widening/Pages/project-highlights.aspx>

*\*This project provides a great jumping off point for other messaging, programs, etc. related to the history of Parkway construction. Parkway staff have an opportunity to point to the work underway on the I26 bridge and make a very tangible connection to what it would have been like to see the Blue Ridge Parkway under construction over 80 years ago.*

## **IF ASKED...**

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### **If asked about the Mountains to Sea Trail access during bridge project:**

- The MST will be closed through this section of the Parkway while all of the bridge project work is underway (multi-year period).
- The designated detour route requires MST users to walk on the road shoulder for approximately .25 mile.
- On-site signage and fencing will make it clear at what points MST users leave existing trail and use detour route (see map included in this guidance for more detail).
- Parking within the detour route is not recommended.
- Minor trail realignment can be expected at project completion.

### **If asked about French Broad River access during construction of the new French Broad River Bridge over I-26:**

- The river will remain open for paddlers and other river users with limited exceptions. Any disruptions will be scheduled during the river's off-peak usage times. The safety plan for river users includes signage at 14 put-in locations upstream of the bridge, safe-passage lanes around temporary causeways delineated by buoys, a catchment device to prevent debris falling from above, and bat-friendly red lights identifying causeways and other safety precautions.

### **If asked about costs:**

- Bridge project funding comes from NCDOT
- Total project costs for entire widening project is estimated at approximately \$400 million.
- More information is available on NCDOT website - <https://www.ncdot.gov/projects/i-26-widening/Pages/default.aspx>

### **If asked why NCDOT is widening I-26:**

- Sections of I-26 currently operate at levels of congestion characterized by unstable travel speeds with a high level of discomfort to the driver. As projected traffic volumes increase, more sections of I-26 are projected to operate at similar levels of congestion. By 2040, I-26 is anticipated to operate over capacity, hindering its ability to serve high-speed regional travel.
- The project will also improve pavement structure and deteriorating existing road surface conditions. The existing roadway surface on I-26 in the project area has undergone major rehabilitation twice, most recently in 2011.
- Widening I-26 in the project area will improve overall roadway capacity to better handle existing and future traffic volumes.
- More information is available on NCDOT website - <https://www.ncdot.gov/projects/i-26-widening/Pages/default.aspx>



## HELPFUL MAPS:

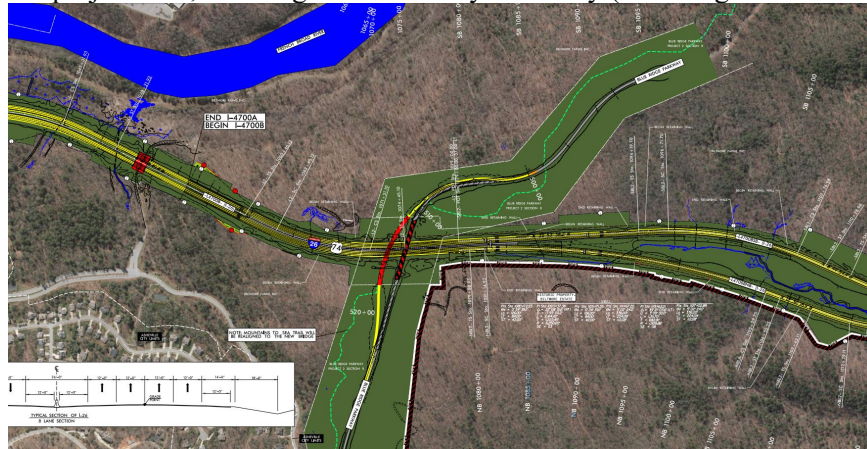




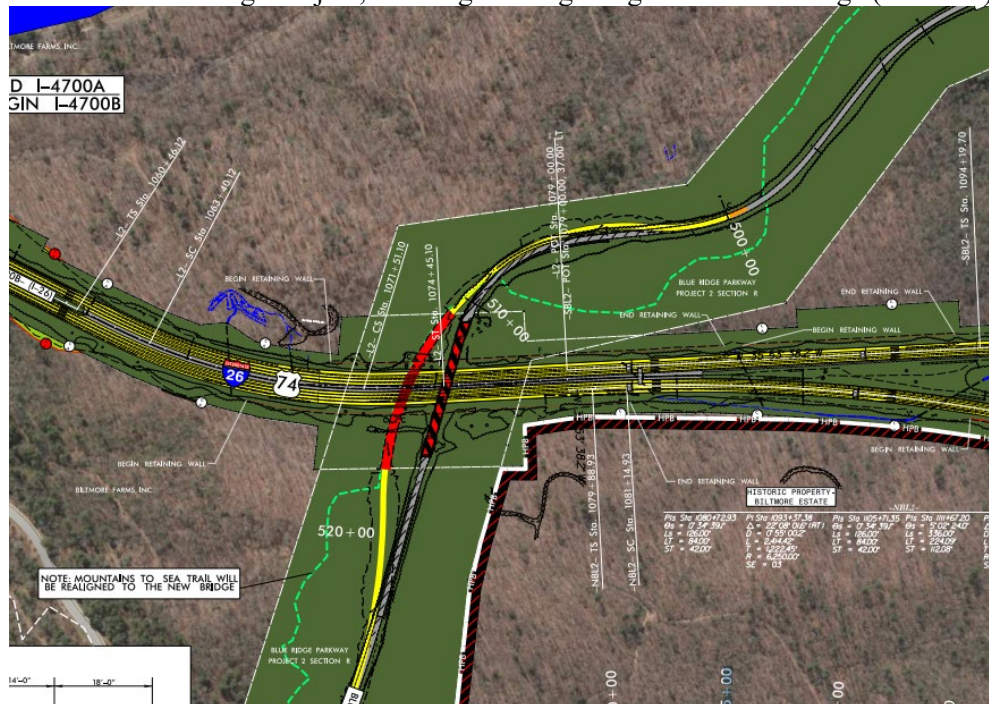
Complete 16-Mile Project Area:



Partial project area, zooming in on Parkway boundary (vertical green boundary):



Detail View of Bridge Project, showing existing bridge and future bridge (solid red):



<https://www.ncdot.gov/projects/i-26-widening/Documents/nc-146-i-26-bridge.pdf>