

A committee appointed by Mayor Fraim and City Council to develop recommendations to ease traffic congestion on Hampton Boulevard released its final report on Tuesday, June 10. The report includes both short and long term solutions. Mayor Fraim recommended and the City Council agreed to ask the commission to continue to monitor conditions on Hampton Boulevard. City Manager Regina Williams has been charged with reviewing the report and then establishing recommendations for City Council to consider.

May 2, 2008

To the Honorable Council
City of Norfolk, Virginia

Dear Mayor Fraim and Members of Norfolk City Council:

The Hampton Boulevard Congestion Panel has completed its review of traffic and congestion issues along the study corridor and is pleased to forward the attached final report of findings and recommendations for consideration. The Panel has worked to understand the current and likely future travel challenges along Hampton Boulevard, reviewed the impacts of this traffic on both communities and institutions along the route, and developed an extensive menu of multiple actions and strategies that can be implemented over time to help to address the major transportation and development issues in the corridor.

The Panel's work program over the past three months has also been extremely beneficial in developing a broader appreciation among all Panel members of the full picture of traffic and travel conditions along Hampton Boulevard. In particular, moving beyond the needs and interests of any single entity or institution, we believe, is essential to making real progress since the Hampton Boulevard problems are too multi-faceted and complex to yield to any single solution or approach. A partnership moving forward on multiple fronts in both the near and long terms will be required in order to be successful in both reducing congestion and also increasing livability along the Hampton Boulevard corridor. In this vein, it is also critically important that formal procedures for ongoing implementation monitoring to ensure accountability of all parties be put into place. We recommend that the Panel continue to meet no less than quarterly for at least a year in order to monitor progress on recommended actions and steps.

The Panel would like to thank City Council for the opportunity to work together on this issue of critical importance to all of us. It is hoped that some of the connections and working relationships made among the Panel members during the study process will continue and bear fruit since all parties with an interest in the corridor must work together in order to achieve maximum results and success. Appreciation is also expressed to the City of Norfolk staff members, consultants, and invited guests from the Virginia Department of Transportation and Hampton Roads Transit who supported the Panel during its work. It would have been impossible to make as much progress as we did in the very compressed timeframe available for this analysis without the aid and assistance of these professionals.

Respectfully submitted,

Members of the Hampton Boulevard Congestion Panel

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Overview: A Corridor Stressed Beyond its Limits

Hampton Boulevard, strictly speaking, is a major arterial highway running primarily in a north/south direction on the western side of the City of Norfolk stretching for approximately 6.2 miles from the Midtown Tunnel and Brambleton Avenue on the south to the main entrance to Naval Station Norfolk on the north at the intersection of Admiral Tausig Boulevard. In reality though, Hampton Boulevard is one of the most important travel and transportation corridors in the entire Hampton Roads region with four major institutions, including the Naval Station Norfolk; Old Dominion University (ODU); Norfolk International Terminals (NIT); and the Medical Center Complex including Sentara Norfolk General and Heart Hospitals, Children's Hospital of the Kings Daughters (CHKD), and Eastern Virginia Medical School (EVMS); all depending upon the route as a major point for both access to and egress from their facilities. In particular, the truck traffic related to the Naval Station Norfolk, the largest employment center in the Hampton Roads region with over 70,000 employees at present, and NIT which is one of the busiest container port terminals along the entire eastern seaboard of the United States has been an ongoing issue of concern for the City of Norfolk over a number of years.

A long summary of the available travel and congestion statistics for the Hampton Boulevard corridor do not need to be listed here in any great detail since both City Council members and the general public already know all too well the overall level of congestion and travel frustration experienced daily in the corridor. In short, the traffic counts, for both total vehicles and trucks are high and growing, and the travel performance statistics are poor and worsening. Moreover, all the numbers and statistics add up to a simple fact – Hampton Boulevard is being asked to do too much and handle travel demands in excess of what it was designed to and is capable of doing. These problems are particularly acute south of 25th Street where Hampton Boulevard becomes a four lane undivided facility until its terminus at the Midtown Tunnel and Brambleton Avenue.

Continuing with the current situation is completely untenable and inaction will lead to ever growing frustration and impacts for all affected parties along the Hampton Boulevard corridor. Neither the economic needs of the Hampton Boulevard corridor nor the quality of life concerns of the communities adjacent to the route are served by the status quo.

Principles and Key Observations: Understanding the Complexities

Understanding both the overall functioning and needs of the major institutions and facilities dependent upon Hampton Boulevard as well as the experienced traffic and travel patterns along the route proved to be beneficial in guiding the Panel's discussions. Despite the varying backgrounds and interests of the members, the group was able to develop broad agreement on a number of principles and observations which in turn helped to shape the search for solutions. These findings are summarized here briefly.

First, the formidable economic impact of the four major activity generators on Hampton Boulevard when seeking solutions for the negative consequences of traffic congestion along Hampton Boulevard must remain in the forefront of all discussions of the corridor.

While seeking short-term solutions, the City should attempt to avoid actions that would cause harm to any of the activity generators.

Secondly, traffic congestion on Hampton Boulevard is a manifestation of the region's transportation dilemma, but the City of Norfolk cannot act alone to solve regional traffic issues. Traffic congestion on Hampton Boulevard has consequences for the entire region and must be addressed as part of the regional transportation network. Hampton Boulevard is not a "Norfolk only" road; what happens here has implications for every city in the region even though the road itself is contained within one city.

The Commonwealth of Virginia is the owner of the major port facilities in Hampton Roads and is the primary benefactor of port operations. Protecting its investment and remaining competitive requires that the state take a proactive stance in solving the transportation issue facing the port. Most significant in this regard would be resolving the port's transportation needs with the Third Crossing which will provide significant relief to traffic congestion on Hampton Boulevard.

Providing for new road capacity is only part of the total solution. The broader opportunity to solve the problem is by addressing alternative transportation via public transit. Improving and enhancing bus service and extending the light rail transit from its terminus at the Medical Center complex to Old Dominion University and the Naval Base Norfolk complex would provide transportation options that can alleviate some of the congestion on Hampton Boulevard—especially if The Tide LRT system becomes a viable commuting option for suburban residents and students by extending into Virginia Beach, Chesapeake, and Portsmouth.

In summary, the members of the Hampton Boulevard Traffic Congestion Review Panel represent diverse perspectives and constituencies. Yet the Panel generally agrees on the following observations:

1. There are four large activity centers located on the Hampton Boulevard corridor (Sentara/CHKD/EVMS Medical Center, Old Dominion University, Norfolk International Terminals, and Norfolk Naval Base). Individually and collectively, these activity centers are economic engines with significant impact on the economy of Norfolk, the Hampton Roads region, and Commonwealth of Virginia and beyond. The economic benefits of these activity centers are geographically diffuse while the negative consequences of their operations are concentrated in close proximity to the institutions themselves. It is the residents of the Hampton Boulevard corridor who suffer most directly from the negative consequences of these activity generators.
2. For much of its length, the Hampton Boulevard corridor has a residential character. Residential dwellings are the predominant form of development along the edge of the corridor and for several blocks to the west and east of Hampton Boulevard.

3. Hampton Boulevard was not designed to carry the number of vehicles that currently use it on a daily basis. The regional road network and location and limited number of bridge/tunnel water crossings mean that many of the users on Hampton Boulevard have no alternative roads to use as viable options.
4. Norfolk International Terminals does not have comparable direct access to Interstate highways and commercial arterial highways as other major ports of similar size. Additionally, few competing ports are as integrated into predominantly residential areas as Norfolk International Terminals.
5. The “normal” operations of the key institutions in the Hampton Boulevard corridor each tend to generate peak traffic between 3:00 pm and 6:00 pm on weekdays. The geographic area between the Midtown Tunnel and Old Dominion University is the “common denominator” area where traffic generated by all four institutions overlaps—especially during the 3:00 pm to 6:00 pm peak traffic period.
6. The limited capacity of the Midtown Tunnel creates a bottleneck that causes traffic to stack-up on Hampton Boulevard and causes some motorists to seek short-cuts through residential areas.
7. Large trucks associated with Norfolk International Terminals are highly visible targets for citizen complaints. While trucks account for a relatively minor share of total vehicular traffic (about 5% of total vehicles), they can be noisy, they may cause vibration, and they are often perceived as exceeding speed limits. Trucks however are not the biggest cause of the traffic congestion problem in the Hampton Boulevard corridor.
8. There is no simple solution or “silver bullet” to solve the problem of traffic congestion on Hampton Boulevard. Reducing traffic congestion on Hampton Boulevard requires a combination of actions with various costs and implementation schedules and actions by multiple agencies.

Recommendations: A Better Future

We have developed a listing of recommended action strategies to help to improve conditions along Hampton Boulevard for residents, businesses, and commuters alike. The final options listed here for consideration have been grouped into four main categories: Transit, Government Action and Funding, Institutional Initiatives, and Traffic and Safety. Each of these subject areas are discussed more fully below.

I. TRANSIT

The significant volume of traffic within the Hampton Boulevard corridor is primarily attributable to the corridor’s major institutions – the Navy Base, the Port of Virginia, Old Dominion University, and the Medical Complex at the southern terminus. Despite this

recognition of the impact of these institutions upon the Hampton Boulevard traffic, this corridor remains poorly served by transit. The few public, Hampton Roads Transit (HRT) routes that service these institutions offer little express service, or convenient park and ride options. Although Old Dominion University has contracted with HRT for free ridership for its students, this transit option has not been well received due to its lack of convenience. Several private providers offer direct bus service to the Base from outside the City of Norfolk.

The improvement of existing transit services and the addition of new services such as park and ride and light rail offer significant opportunities to alleviate current congestion. The Study Panel recommends the following short- and longer-term alternatives:

Short-Term

- Expand the current stakeholder focus on alleviating traffic congestion on Hampton Boulevard by including both HRT and Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) staff and Board members in on-going efforts which further analyze, plan, finance, and implement enhanced transit services.
- Provide more commuter-friendly transit services such as more frequent service during peak hours, non-stop service to the Norfolk Naval Base, ODU, and the Medical Complex.
- Expand transit routes on the west side of the City to encourage more ridership by ODU students.
- Encourage the Base, Port, ODU, and the Medical Complex to promote use of current transit options, as well as implement disincentives for private vehicle usage for commuting such as paid/limited parking at these facilities.
- Develop direct HRT bus routes to the Base from population centers throughout the Region.

Long-Term

- Construct and operate large-scale park and ride facilities to Norfolk from locations to the south and the west to reduce the number of single occupant vehicles using the Midtown Tunnel. Utilize direct, express bus service to the major employers and ODU with express buses having priority entrance access to the tunnel ahead the line of traffic.
- Initiate planning for the expansion of light rail to serve the Base, Port, and ODU. Determine alternative routes, costs, and system components as soon as possible. Seek both Federal and State funding for this targeted light rail study and development for the Base, Port, and ODU.
- Extend light rail to serve the Base, Port, and ODU.

II. GOVERNMENT ACTION AND FUNDING

The Hampton Boulevard Traffic Congestion Panel has concluded that the congestion problem is complex with many contributing factors, and congestion relief is equally complex with varied solutions and remedies. In addition to considering administrative or operational changes that directly involve the Hampton Boulevard traffic flow, a broader, more regional approach must be incorporated to accomplish a viable, long lasting solution.

This approach requires Governmental and Legislative actions to provide adequate, sustainable funding for an improved transportation infrastructure that would alleviate and reduce the amount of traffic required to use Hampton Boulevard. In this regard, the Study Panel recommends the following:

- The City Council should continue to endorse and support the Hampton Roads Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) transportation projects, with emphasis placed on the expansion of the Midtown Tunnel and Third Crossing projects. The City Council should utilize whatever governmental and political processes available to encourage suitable funding for these projects so that they may move forward as quickly as possible. It is suggested that construction on a Midtown Tunnel expansion begin in 2009.
- The City Council should encourage constituent support of the MPO projects that will provide the necessary transportation infrastructure to relieve congestion and foster economic growth.
- The City Council should work with Norfolk Southern to investigate the possibility of widening the railroad underpass at 21st Street. The underpass slows traffic due to limited lane size and presents a hazard for vehicles.

III. INSTITUTIONAL INITIATIVES

The Hampton Boulevard Traffic Congestion Panel quickly came to a consensus that outside of the residents and businesses along the Hampton Blvd Corridor there were four major institutions (Old Dominion University, the Sentara/EVMS/ CHKD Medical Center, Norfolk International Terminals, and Naval Station Norfolk) that directly depend upon Hampton Boulevard as a major point for access to and egress to and from their facilities. Hampton Boulevard was not designed to accommodate the volume of traffic that currently uses the road, and the internal business practices and parking policies of these institutions impact the volume and timing of peak vehicle use of Hampton Blvd.

Accordingly, the panel believes it is imperative that the four institutions work in a coordinated manner to share internal plans that support and incentivize carpooling and mass transportation development. During the panel meetings a list of recommendations/action strategies was developed to improve safety and traffic conditions along Hampton Boulevard. The recommendations are listed below by order of short and long term implementation.

Short Term

- Implement flex work schedules of major employers to spread out trips (i.e. class schedules at ODU, gate hours at NIT and truck inspection hours at Naval Station Norfolk)
- Encourage movement of containers by rail and water (short sea shipping) instead of by truck to eliminate some container truck traffic on Hampton Boulevard.
- Major employers should include incentives for car-pooling if they do not already offer incentives for ridesharing.
- Norfolk Southern should be officially asked to limit train crossings of Hampton Boulevard at NIT during peak traffic times to reduce congestion.

Long Term

- Explore alternatives to reduce the number of cars: charge for parking at Naval Base Norfolk as a disincentive to single-occupancy private auto use; encourage carpooling by employees of all major institutions and students at ODU; subsidize bus/transit usage; limit the number of parking spots at Naval Base Norfolk to create a disincentive to private auto use.
- Build a pedestrian bridge over Hampton Boulevard at ODU to provide a safer means of crossing Hampton Boulevard and minimize pedestrian crosswalk delays.
- Conduct a study of the old Norfolk Southern tracks to explore options for re-use by light rail.
- Develop satellite parking areas for ODU students, faculty and staff connected to efficient bus or light rail transit in the Highland Park/Kensington neighborhood areas.
- Move Navy truck inspection station from Hampton Boulevard to I-564 to divert truck traffic away from Hampton Boulevard.

IV. TRAFFIC and SAFETY

The recommendations in this section of the report deal with action items that can have an immediate impact on improving traffic flow on Hampton Boulevard. Most are relatively inexpensive and can be accomplished in the short-term

- Pursue immediate, detailed study, with updated peak hour counts, of a reversal of traffic flow at the Midtown Tunnel during the PM peak exiting Norfolk (two lanes exiting Norfolk).

- Coordinate the timing of traffic signals along the corridor to maximize the flow of traffic at posted speeds.
- Review need for turn restrictions (both left and right turns) along Hampton Boulevard and possibly prohibit commute direction turns to insure an uninterrupted traffic flow during peak hours. This would include intersections not currently covered by any such restrictions, particular at the narrow southern end of the Hampton Boulevard corridor.
- Pursue expanded safety improvements in the corridor such as red light cameras, selective enforcement initiatives and “Don’t Block the Box” programs at critical intersections.
- Review, create and/or modify lane restrictions for trucks (i.e., use of center lane only in the 3-lane portion).
- Conduct updated and more comprehensive origin and destination studies of traffic and travel patterns along the Hampton Boulevard corridor.
- Create and/or strengthen fines for over-height vehicles and other “bad behavior” drivers who impair traffic movement at the Midtown Tunnel and have VIT reactivate the over-height warning system at the port exit.
- Consistent and aggressive enforcement of traffic regulations.

Implementation, Accountability and Oversight: Achieving Results

As stated previously, it has become clear through the Panel’s meeting and study process that there is not just a single action or “silver bullet” to solve the traffic and transportation challenges facing Hampton Boulevard. However, the Panel believes that accomplishing most, if not, all the above recommendations will have a significant impact on easing the overall traffic situation both in the near and long term. It is, therefore, the Panel’s opinion that action should be taken immediately on those items that can be addressed in the near term while the process of seeking funding and approvals moves forward on the larger projects and initiatives.

The Panel is convinced that winning small battles will help create forward momentum and contribute to a sense of urgency that has been lacking related to the situation along Hampton Boulevard. We also subscribe to the idea that what gets measured gets done. To that end, we strongly recommend that an accounting of the successes and failures as these initiatives be formally undertaken between Panel members as implementation efforts move forward. Given the time already invested, the knowledge gained, and the passion the Panel members have to make meaningful progress, the Panel would like to continue in a role the Council sees appropriate to create a clear and visible accountability and oversight function for progress on Hampton Boulevard. The panel also recommends that any ongoing organization focusing on implementation efforts in the corridor be expanded

to include representation from HRT given the pivotal role transit needs to play in the development of solutions for the Hampton Boulevard corridor and also VDOT.