

Public Involvement at the Planning Level: A Case Study of the University of Maryland Eastern Shore Access Road

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Perhaps the most visible aspect of the Maryland State Highway Administration's commitment to quality in citizen participation is in the administration's forward thinking in the project planning process and in its efforts to assemble locally appropriate and environmentally sensitive solutions to the transportation needs of the state. This is accomplished by the special attention given to public participation and involvement in every aspect of the project planning and development process. Maryland State Highway Administration's public involvement program is highlighted, and the implementation of the program and its positive aspects are described using a case study of the University of Maryland Eastern Shore Access Road.

The University of Maryland Eastern Shore (UMES) Access Road is proposed to serve as a new main entrance into the university, a distance of slightly more than 1 km (less than 1 mi). The UMES Access Road project planning study was initiated on June 7, 1989, and the combined location and design public hearing was held on March 30, 1992. Nine alternatives were developed, five of which were studied in detail and presented at the public hearing. One of the alternatives presented at the hearing was proposed by local citizens. The alternative that will be carried forward for design and subsequent construction is a modification of the one proposed by the local citizens.

PROJECT HISTORY

The town of Princess Anne is located in Somerset County on Maryland's Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay with a 1990 population of approximately 1,700. The town is the administrative center for the county government and is its second largest town (Figure 1). Princess Anne is located approximately 193 km (120 mi) southeast of Baltimore, Maryland, and 161 km (100 mi) north of Norfolk, Virginia.

The town of Princess Anne houses the Eastern Shore Campus of the University of Maryland. The university had its origin on September 13, 1886, and records reveal that 37 students were enrolled by the end of 1886. The expansion projections issues in 1989 by the university show 2,548 students in 1995 and 3,173 students by the year 2000.

The UMES Access Road Study first appeared as a project planning study for MD-362 Extended (Valentine Drive, pre-

viously known as Mt. Vernon Drive) in the Maryland Department of Transportation's Consolidated Transportation Program (CTP) for FY 1989-1994.

Inclusion in the 1989-1994 CTP followed its identification as the first priority for Somerset County's secondary highway system. The project is currently included in the draft FY 1991-1996 CTP for the project planning phase only. This project has an extensive Highway Needs Inventory (HNI) history, having appeared in the 1973 HNI and each subsequent biennial HNI update. This proposal is consistent with established land policy in the area and has the identified support of the 1975 Comprehensive Development Plan for Somerset County.

PROJECT PLANNING PROCESS

The Maryland Highway Administration project planning process consists of three phases. Phase 1 consists of engineering, traffic, and environmental assessments; governmental agencies and citizens' groups contact; preliminary design concepts; and preliminary right-of-way, relocation, and construction cost estimates. This phase ends by holding an alternatives public meeting.

Phase 2 of the Maryland Highway Administration project planning process consists of reviewing public comments received at the public meeting, developing detailed engineering and natural and socioeconomic environmental analyses, and preparing and circulating the draft environmental document. This phase ends with a combined location and design hearing.

Phase 3 of the Maryland Highway Administration project planning process consists of reviewing public comments received at the public hearing, evaluating the governmental environmental agency and citizen input, value engineering of the selected alternatives in Phase 2, making a recommendation to the state highway administrator to select an alternative design, and circulating the final environmental document containing the selected alternative. This phase ends with the distribution of the public notice indicating receipt of location approval.

PROJECT NEED

The purpose of the UMES study was to verify and document the need for improved access to the university and to evaluate all feasible alternatives that would accomplish this goal.

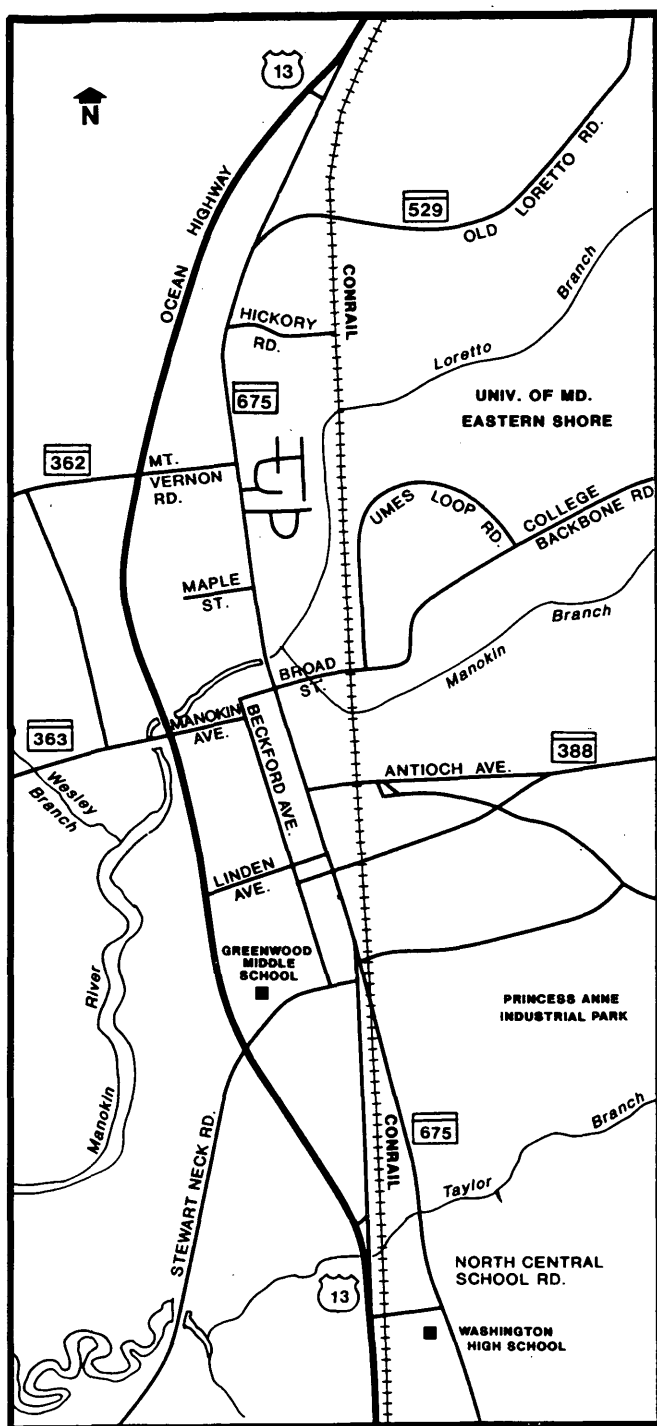


FIGURE 1 Vicinity map of UMES Access Road (not to scale).

Enrollment at UMES has experienced considerable growth in recent years, resulting in increased traffic volumes within the town of Princess Anne. Traffic destined for the UMES campus must negotiate several right-angle turns on local streets, creating turning movement conflicts, particularly in peak hours. By providing more direct access to UMES, some of the campus-bound traffic will be removed from local streets.

The existing entrance route consists of a variable-width two-lane roadway with intermittent curb and sidewalk on one side

and earth shoulder on the other. The curb and sidewalk alternate from one side to the other.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS

Mailing List and Public Notice

To effectively consult with the public during project planning and development, the State Highway Administration (SHA) maintains a mailing list for each project. Initially, government and elected officials, as well as known community organizations, are included on this list. Persons on the mailing list receive individual copies of all brochures, newsletters, and any other material related to the project.

The intent to initiate project planning activities for the UMES Access Road Study and solicitation for public involvement and inclusion on the project mailing list were blanket mailed to all mailing addresses in the area of the project and published in several newspapers: *The Baltimore Sun* (statewide), *News and Farmer* (regional, Eastern Shore), and *Somerset Herald* (local). The information was also submitted to the local broadcast stations for inclusion in their public bulletins and a press release was issued to the local news media through the SHA Public Affairs Office.

The project planning team developed five alternatives, including Alternative 1, the no-build alternative. Alternative 4 (Figure 2), in particular, received a great deal of attention. On the one hand Alternative 4 facilitated a direct access from US-13 to the UMES campus along the main business district on Mt. Vernon Road (MD-362), whereas on the other it directed the university traffic through a residential area, Princess Anne Estates.

Alternative 4 proposed the extension of existing MD-362 (Mt. Vernon Road) with new roadway construction east from MD-675, Somerset Avenue, to connect with existing Valentine Drive. The new roadway construction was proposed to extend east from the end of Valentine Drive to the UMES loop road. This alternative is documented in the Somerset County Master Plan (1963) and the Comprehensive Development Plan for Somerset County (1975). Valentine Drive was constructed to meet criteria as a part of the future extension of MD-362.

Early in the project around 35 residents of the Princess Anne Estates along Valentine Drive (MD-362 Extended) signed a petition expressing concern that the initial name of the project, MD-362 Extended, indicated a predetermined decision by SHA to extend MD-362, which they strongly opposed. They suggested a new alignment, Alternative 6 (Figure 2), that bypassed the town.

Alternative 6 proposes a UMES entrance road that begins at MD-675 at the approximate location of its existing intersection with Hickory Road, extends east, and curves toward the south, ending at the UMES loop road. In addition to Alternative 6, the project planning team proposed Alternative 6A, which is essentially the same as Alternative 6, except that it would extend Alternative 6 approximately 200 m (650 ft) west from MD-675 to US-13, the major north-south highway in the area. The project name was changed to reflect its broader need and became known as the UMES Access Road Study.

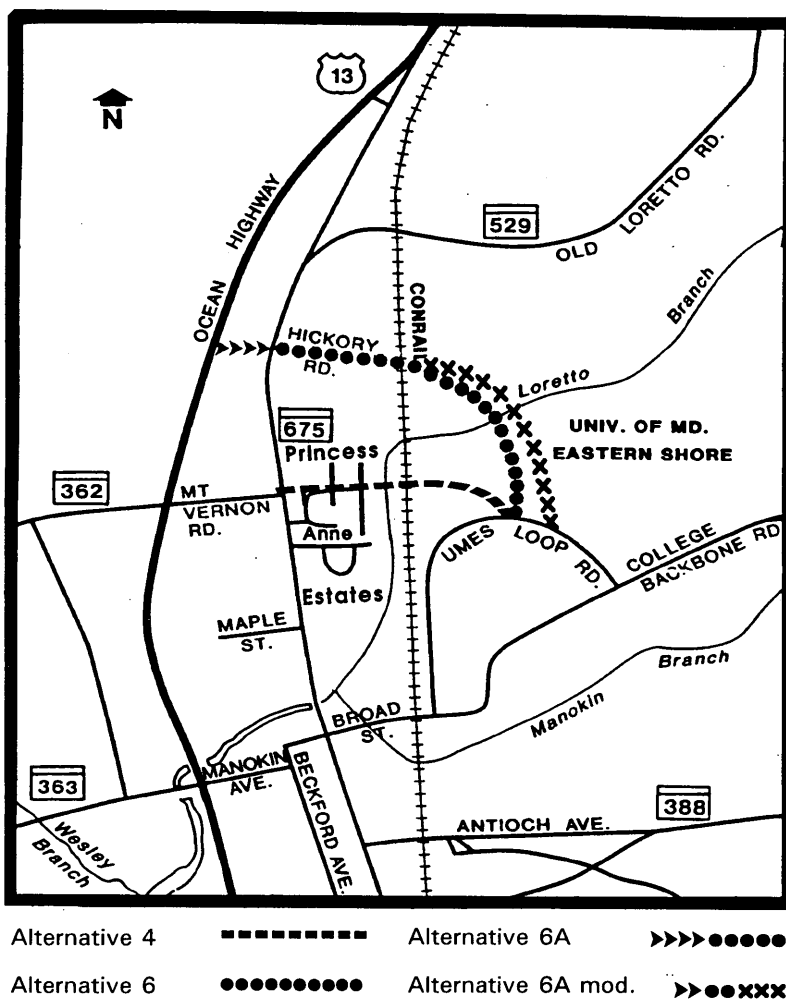


FIGURE 2 UMES Access Road: Alternatives 4, 6, 6A, and 6A modified (not to scale).

Public Meeting

Informal Meetings

To ensure interaction between the SHA project planning staff and the citizens of Maryland, informal public meetings are often held. These range widely in size and format from one-on-one meetings with individual citizens to small groups and special interest organizations to large informational meetings. The meetings are usually located in the project area and are scheduled for the convenience of the public expected to attend.

On January 30, 1990, an informational meeting was held at the Somerset County Library in Princess Anne with residents of the Princess Anne Estates community to provide a clear understanding of the project planning process, to change any preconceived notions that the administration had already chosen an alternative, to provide a forum for interested local citizens to provide comments into the project in the early

stages of development, and to present all alternatives developed at that time, including Alternatives 6 and 6A.

On February 1, 1990, an informative meeting was held to brief UMES representatives and county officials on the project and the concerns of the residents of Princess Anne Estates.

Formal Meetings

Alternatives Public Meeting In addition to the informal meetings, the SHA Project Planning Division holds alternatives public meetings approximately one-third of the way through the project planning process. The purpose of these meetings is

- To present to the public the preliminary alternatives developed with preliminary analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of each and the cost, geometric design, and environmental impact associated with each. The right-of-way

acquisition process, relocation assistance, and the nondiscrimination in federally assisted and state aid programs are also presented.

- To recommend certain alternatives for detailed analysis.
- To receive public comment on the alternatives presented and suggestions for new ones.

A public notice is published in at least one newspaper, including a map highlighting the area of the study. The notice and a brochure summarizing all the alternatives and their associated environmental, social, and economical impacts are circulated to those on the mailing list before this public meeting. A preaddressed form is included in the brochure for those who choose to submit written comments or request that their names be added to the project mailing list. The brochure is also available at the meeting.

Displays of the conceptual alternatives are available at the meeting, and SHA representatives are available to answer questions and record comments. A formal presentation by SHA staff is given, followed by receipt of public comments.

On March 14, 1990, an alternatives public meeting for the UMES Access Road Study was held at the Greenwood Elementary School in Princess Anne. Public notice was given through the same media used in the project initiation notice. Approximately 50 people attended: 8 requested to speak and 4 more spoke after the registered speakers. All of the opinions expressed, with the exception of one representing the business community along MD-362, were against Alternative 4 (MD-362 Extended).

Alternatives 1 (no-build alternative), 4, 6, and 6A were selected for detailed study, whereas Alternatives 2, 3, and 5 were dropped from further consideration because of adverse environmental and historic impacts.

Public Hearing On the completion of Phase 1 of the project planning activities, a detailed analysis of selected alternatives is conducted. After this analysis, the SHA holds separate location and design hearings or a single combined location/design hearing, depending on the classification of the project and the prospects of the project being continuously scheduled through design. This decision is made by the SHA. In general, two hearings are held on projects that are considered circumferential or bypass corridors, expressways on new locations, or major bridge or tunnel projects.

Two notices of a public hearing are published in at least one newspaper circulated in the project area. The procedure for requesting to speak at the hearing is explained in the notice. The first notice is published at least 30 days before the hearing and a subsequent notice is published within 2 weeks of the hearing. In addition, the public notice and brochure are mailed to those on the mailing list. The notice states the availability and location of a draft environmental document pertaining to the project.

The purpose of the hearing is to provide a means for the public who wish to express on record their views concerning the project. As in the alternatives public meeting, maps depicting the alternatives under consideration are displayed, and SHA representatives are present to answer questions. In addition, the SHA holds informal public meetings as needed or requested by the public to ensure continued interaction be-

tween the SHA project planning staff and the citizens of Maryland.

On January 22, 1991, SHA representatives met with members of the business community along MD-362. The business community aired its support for Alternative 4. On September 18, 1991, a meeting was held at the Princess Anne town offices to brief the newly appointed town manager on the history and development of the project planning study. On January 22, 1992, a meeting at UMES was held with university officials to bring them up to date on the development of the project.

The first notice for a combined location and design public hearing for the UMES Access Road project planning study was published on March 18, 1992, followed by a second notice on April 15, 1992. The draft environmental document was on display 15 days before the hearing at the county public library in Princess Anne, the SHA local district office in Salisbury, and SHA headquarters in Baltimore.

A combined location and design public hearing for the UMES Access Road Study was held on Thursday, April 30, 1992, at 7:30 p.m. in Greenwood Middle School. Approximately 80 people attended. Nine people requested to speak. The opinions expressed at the hearing were mixed.

SELECTION OF ALTERNATIVES

On completion of Phase 2 of the project planning process, a review of public and governmental and environmental agencies' comments is conducted, a value engineering team to evaluate the alternatives developed and ensure that the project was not overdesigned is assembled, and a project planning team recommendation meeting is held with the director of the Office of Planning and Preliminary Engineering (OPPE) to select an alternative to be recommended to the administrator.

A team recommendation meeting with the director of OPPE for the UMES Access Road Study was held on June 16, 1992. Alternative 6A modified was selected for recommendation to the administrator. Alternative 6A modified shifts 6A slightly to the east to avoid a major portion of wetlands (Figure 2). A team meeting with the administrator was held on November 17, the team recommendation was accepted, and the location approval notice was circulated in the spring of 1993.

FINAL REMARKS

The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA) provides an exciting opportunity for the states to manage federal monies for their transportation needs with minimum involvement by the federal agencies. It is believed that the public is well educated enough to act as environmental and socioeconomic watchdogs over the best interests of the local residents. The Maryland SHA has always encouraged active citizen participation. The UMES Access Road project demonstrates the positive outcome of a policy that encourages citizen involvement in the project planning process and helps to identify and implement locally appropriate and acceptable solutions to the highway needs of the state.

Perhaps the most obvious impact of such a simple but effective process was the citizens' increased trust in the process.

The citizens at the initial stages of the project were convinced that a predetermination had been made (Alternative 4), and the only motivation for the project planning team was to go through the motions. A clear change of heart was seen in the citizens from the initial informational meeting where the atmosphere was full of mistrust and was at times chaotic to the public hearing where the citizens demonstrated confidence that the system works. This was shown in the increased attendance from 50 people at the alternatives public meeting to 80 people at the public hearing.

Clearly one of the reasons why Maryland SHA was able to regain the public's trust was the change in the project name from MD-362 Extended to UMES Access Road. Although the extension of MD-362 through the Princess Anne Estates is included in the county's master plan and the reservation of an 80-ft right-of-way was shown on the Princess Anne Estates subdivision plat, the name MD-362 Extended did not reflect the actual need for the project, that is, direct access to the university, and gave the impression of a limited project scope.

A second reason for gaining credibility with the citizens was that SHA took a serious look at the citizens' proposal and gave the citizens full credit for Alternatives 6 and 6A in all of the official correspondence and public contact. It was made

clear to the citizens that the modifications proposed by SHA to Alternative 6 were valid engineering and environmental modifications that would maintain the integrity of the concept.

Finally the open-door policy that the administration encourages and supports fosters trust and credibility through direct contact between the project planning team and the citizens of Maryland. These are mainly telephone contact and informal meetings, such as one-on-one discussion at the public meetings and the brief meetings in the residents' back yards when the project planning team was on a field review trip.

The town of Princess Anne suffered a major economic setback when it was bypassed by US-13, the major north-south highway in the area. The planning team believed that another bypass would not be a popular decision nor in the best interest of the residents of the town. The project planning team may not have seen the positive impact associated with Alternative 6 if it had not been proposed by the local citizens, proving once again the value of public involvement in the project planning process.

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