

CITY OF WILMINGTON 2014 TRANSPORTATION BOND: PRIORITIZATION AND EDUCATION OF A SUCCESSFUL TRANSPORTATION BOND INITIATIVE

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Satisfaction with city streets and sidewalks and the management of traffic flow on city streets have consistently ranked at the bottom of citizen surveys dating back to 2007, yet also rank as being the most important city services other than public safety. In meetings held throughout the city in 2014 to garner input on the City's Comprehensive Plan, Wilmingtonians ranked pedestrian/bike trails as a top priority. At the same time, New Hanover County—where Wilmington is located—had the unfortunate distinction of having the most bicycle accidents of all 100 North Carolina counties and was among the top ranked for pedestrian accidents and deaths. It was apparent more pedestrian and bike accommodations were both wanted and needed.

In early 2014, the City of Wilmington and Wilmington Urban Area MPO identified more than \$240 million in transportation needs, but like other municipalities across the nation, was challenged by shrinking state and federal funding. The city utilized an evaluation matrix to analyze each of the projects under consideration. After several months of study, elected officials overlaid an exhaustive list of prioritized transportation needs with citizen input received through the biennial citizen survey and the ongoing comprehensive planning process, which included neighborhood meetings across the city. The result was a list of 38 projects throughout the city worth \$55 million. The projects would require a \$44 million transportation bond and a 2-cent property tax increase. The \$11 million difference would be leveraged from existing funds.

While the benefits of the bond seemed clear, the city faced a daunting challenge. Wilmington voters had not successfully passed a city bond since 2006, and New Hanover County Schools—whose bonds are historically viewed more favorably by taxpayers—introduced a \$160 million bond to appear on the same ballot. For city taxpayers, this would mean a potential 5-cent tax increase if both bonds passed.

The bond referendum was approved by city council in July 2014, leaving only three months and a very limited budget to develop and implement a multi-faceted communications plan to educate citizens and gain support for passage of the bond on November 4, 2014. This outreach and education campaign took on a number of different strategies. The Wilmington Urban Area MPO worked with the City of Wilmington's Communication Department to carefully craft the message and educate the community on the bond initiative.

This presentation will further detail the selection process and outreach strategies used to educate the community on the 2014 City of Wilmington Transportation Bond initiative.