

and industries served the area, and by the early 1900s, several small stores operated at the crossroads. Life and land use remained fairly constant until the latter part of the Twentieth Century.

In 1962 Stanly County constructed a new high school in Red Cross. Housing developments began popping up in the 1990s as growth from Charlotte made the area more attractive as a bedroom community. More small businesses were established in response to the residential growth and more commercial development, pushing out of Charlotte and Albemarle, began creeping closer to town along NC 24/27. The quiet farming community was suddenly faced with being overtaken by unplanned, uncharacteristic growth. In an attempt to control this growth, adjacent municipalities began annexing new lands, coming closer to Red Cross. Their expansions threatened the Town's very existence as a separate and distinct place.

Incorporation was the first step Red Cross took to address these threats. On August 1, 2002, the North Carolina General Assembly approved the Town Charter. Shortly after incorporation, the Town's land area nearly doubled in size as many petitioned the Town for annexation. Years prior to incorporation, older town residents used to gather at Bill Hill's store at the crossing to dream of becoming a town. None of these residents lived long enough to see



NC 24/27 (Old Red Cross Road) in the early 1900s (top image) and today (bottom image). *Images courtesy of the authors.*

## Transportation Planning in a Growing Community

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### The Town of Red Cross - Past and Present

Red Cross was founded in the late 1700s and for nearly two hundred years life changed very little. Originally called "Red Crossing," the Town owes its name to the rich red dirt of the Piedmont and the crossroads of what would eventually become N.C. 24/27 and N.C. 205. N.C. 24/27 remained unpaved until 1925, and N.C. 205 was not paved until 1941.

Rolling farmland dotted by farmhouses dominated the landscape. A few small-scale farming-related businesses

the Town become official, but their story underscores the importance of vision and long term planning for the citizens of Red Cross. Residents Ike and Helen Williams lived in a home near the crossing that today serves as the Town Hall and the nucleus of a future Town Center.

### **The Growth and Impacts of N.C. 24/27**

The rudiments of N.C. 24/27 were in place in Red Cross for more than a century before that stretch of road was designated N.C. 27 as part of North Carolina's original 1922 state highway system. It took years and lots of effort to develop this highway system and for most of that time the clear focus was on moving intrastate traffic with little or no thought to road impacts on the communities they traversed.

In the years since its designation as N.C. 27, the road has experienced many changes. It was paved in 1925 and co-designated N.C. 24 in 1963. In the mid 2000s, the road again "improved" through the town when it was reengineered as a four lane divided highway. It became clear to residents and Town staff that as a central road in the community, N.C. 24/27 no longer unified but rather divided Red Cross. The crossroads that was the center of the community for more than 200 years was no longer suitable as a town center. In 2010, in its first Land Development Code, the Town was forced to locate its planned town center in the southeastern quadrant of the crossroads to allow for density and pedestrian mobility.

### **NCDOT Plans for 24/27**

In 2011, Red Cross staff worked with North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) staff on a draft Comprehensive Transportation Plan (CTP) for Stanly County. A key element of their plan was a continuation of refining access and intersections along the highway. This included implementation of NCDOT's Strategic Highway Corridor's Expressway designation. The Expressway design minimizes points of conflict, but in the eyes of the community, further separated the north and south parts of town. The mention of a potential, but highly unlikely, grade separation at the crossroads alarmed Red Cross leaders. One of the many potential designs discussed in the plan included a cloverleaf interchange that would, in essence, completely wipe out their planned town center. Red Cross declined to approve the draft CTP. Instead, they contacted Carol Rhea, AICP, a partner with the Orion Planning Group (OPG), and asked for her help. Rhea had provided ongoing assistance to the town since 2002, leading efforts on code updates and the creation of the Land Development Plan, a project she shared with Darren Rhodes, chief planner for the Piedmont Office of the NC Division of Community Assistance.

### **The Red Cross Transportation Master Plan**

After discussions with town leaders, the various stakeholders decided to move forward with a town-adopted, policy-based transportation master plan. With the Town's

full support, Rhea and Rhodes pulled in Dana Stoogenke, AICP, director of the Rocky River RPO to help round out the consulting team. This team of public and private consultants not only provided a wealth of experience and knowledge, it helped to reduce costs and to make the plan affordable for the town.

For a town that owns and maintains less than one lane mile of road and has no sidewalk or bicycle amenities, a transportation master plan might seem unnecessary. The plan for Red Cross, though, communicated what the transportation network needs to be, in order to support their long range land development vision including the town center. While NCDOT made great strides in working with communities to address transportation needs within the context of planned land use, in the absence of a clear local vision of what the network needs to be and who it needs to serve, their plans may be at odds with a community's vision, as they were in Red Cross.

Working in concert, the consultant team took turns facilitating meetings, arranging speakers, researching plan elements and answering town questions. The Town's recently adopted Land Development Plan and the project's three consultants provided most of the guidance and information needed for the Transportation Plan; Tim Boland with the Region 10 office of NCDOT also attended a meeting to discuss NCDOT's Superstreet approach in greater detail as well as state plans for N.C. 24/27. The Stanly County Planning Director and the Town's Zoning Administrator attended meetings as well, more to observe than serve as speakers. Both were very involved in the creation of the Land Development Plan.

In 2013, the Town met once again with NCDOT and shared their Transportation Master Plan, triggering potential changes to the CTP in Red Cross. Dicky Hatley, town councilmember and former planning board chair, summed up the effect their new plan had at this meeting saying "The plan gives Red Cross a lot more credibility with NCDOT. With our current Zoning Ordinance, Land Use Plan and Transportation Master Plan, I think we can grow and be happy with what we see."

### **Keys to Success**

Despite the fact they were from separate agencies, Rhea, Rhodes and Stoogenke worked as a team to provide support to the Planning Board on the draft plan and to help the Board present the draft plan to the public and the Town Council. Although OPG took the lead on writing and compiling the plan, this, too, was a collaborative effort that reflects the work of the whole team as well as the Town. Good communication was key to the effective partnership among the consultants and between the consultants and Red Cross. As evinced in Red Cross, effective partnerships require relationship building and good planning requires the development of trust and honest discussion. This cannot be achieved through email or text messages; it requires a commitment to be on the ground in the community working with community leaders and citizens. Other key strategies

that made this plan a success were:

- Help the community focus on the positive. Ask what does the community want instead of what do they NOT want.
- Understand roles and relationships within the community and between the community and other agencies such as NCDOT.
- Understand the purpose of the plan and how it will be used. Keep that in mind when structuring the planning effort and compiling the final document—don't over- or under-plan and don't use a one-size-fits-all plan because they rarely do fit.
- When the budget is limited get creative. There are often solutions, such as the 3-way consulting partnership used in Red Cross, that can leverage resources.

Perhaps the most important take away from this project is that even the smallest town can create a transportation plan as long as there are dedicated citizens with a vision and partners willing to collaborate.

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