

COUNTY OF ALBEMARLE



DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Free Bridge Lane Pilot Program Summary Staff Report

Albemarle County Board of Supervisors August 6, 2025

Free Bridge Lane Promenade Background

Free Bridge Lane is a low-volume, unstriped, VDOT maintained roadway that extends approximately one-half mile from Darden Towe Park to US 250. The west side of the road is an existing extension of Darden Towe Park, which is jointly owned by Albemarle County and the City of Charlottesville. Within this area, there is a 5-foot-wide sidewalk that is too narrow to serve as an adequate shared use path for both bicyclists and pedestrians. On the eastern side of the road, there is an 8-acre parcel proffered by the Riverside Village development that was dedicated to the County as part of a future expansion of Darden Towe Park. The current request before the Board is to petition VDOT to discontinue maintenance of this section of Free Bridge Lane so that the roadway can be closed to vehicular traffic, and the right of way can be incorporated into the surrounding parkland and serve as a wider shared use path.

The 2019 Pantops Master Plan envisioned transitioning Free Bridge Lane from its current condition to a “Green Street” with enhanced bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure and elements of stormwater management. Additionally, Free Bridge Lane was prioritized in the Pantops Master Plan as a “catalyst” project.

In 2022, staff conducted meetings with the Pantops CAC to elicit feedback on the future of Free Bridge Lane. From 2022-2023, staff worked with VDOT, ACPR, FES, consultants, and other local stakeholder groups on a feasibility assessment to design a multiuse promenade (Attachment B). These alternatives were presented to the Board in June 2024. However, rather than pursue a discontinuance at that time, it was decided to conduct a pilot project for a one-year period to determine the desirability of closing the road to vehicular traffic. The pilot project began November 1, 2024, and ends October 6, 2025.

As part of the pilot project, the VDOT Transportation and Mobility Planning Division conducted traffic volume counts of Free Bridge Lane in August 2024 prior to commencing the pilot project. This study counted pedestrians, bicycles, other personal mobility vehicles, and vehicles. VDOT conducted another traffic count in spring 2025 to measure the bicycle and pedestrian usage on Free Bridge Lane.

As the October 2025 deadline approaches, the Board is requested to direct staff to either pursue permanent discontinuance for Free Bridge Lane to transform it into a promenade or to revert the road back to a thru road for automobiles.

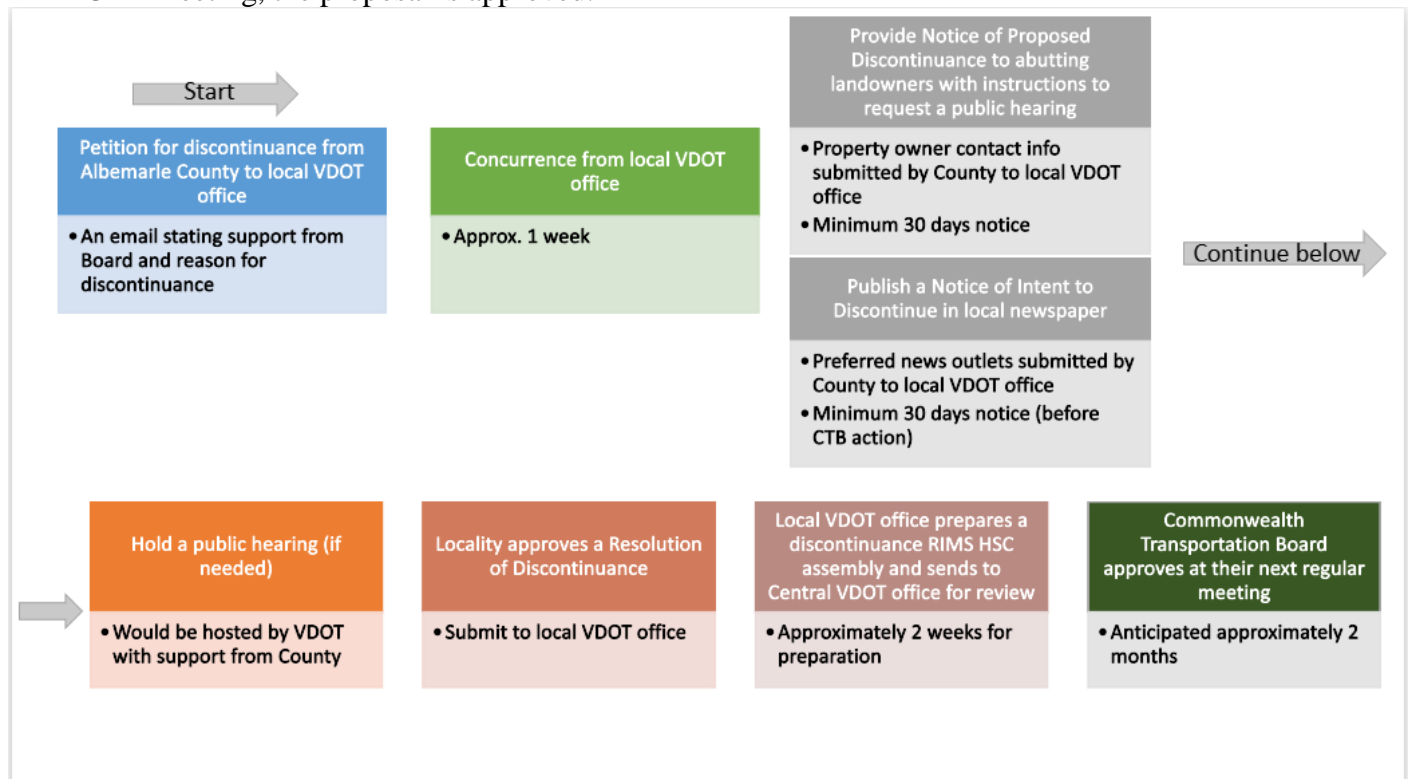
Discontinuance of Free Bridge Lane

Process

The County can choose between two processes to close the road – abandonment or discontinuance. Abandonment means the public's right to use a public roadway has been extinguished and the underlying land returns to the adjacent property owners. Discontinuance means that the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) has determined that a roadway no longer serves the public convenience warranting its maintenance at public expense; it divests VDOT from maintenance responsibilities. Discontinuance does not render a roadway unavailable for public use. For Free Bridge Lane, staff recommends a discontinuance that will allow for public use and a transfer of maintenance of the facility from VDOT to the County.

The chart below outlines VDOT's 3-to-4-month process for discontinuance. The County is currently at the first step in this process, which requires the County's written petition to the local VDOT Charlottesville Residency (VDOT Residency) to initiate the discontinuance process. If the Board directs staff to pursue discontinuance, the County will submit a letter Petitioning Discontinuance of Free Bridge Lane the Residency (Attachment C).

After concurrence from VDOT, the discontinuance must be advertised, and if requested, a public hearing must be held. Following this, the Board of Supervisors must adopt a resolution supporting discontinuance. VDOT reviews at both a local and State level, and then at the next CTB meeting, the proposal is approved.



Beyond Discontinuance

The current pilot project has proven to be a success and it functions well in its current state. Opportunities exist to further improve Free Bridge Lane as a bike/ pedestrian facility by improving the parking in this area and extending the shared use path up stream to the tennis courts in Darden Towe, where the County Parks Department recently completed a paved path that connects the tennis courts up to the Route 20/ Elks Drive intersection and the neighborhoods of Avemore, Fontana, Cascadia, and Wilton Farms. The other opportunity is to improve the narrow, paved trail that runs downstream and under the Free Bridge (Route 250). Over the next year, staff will investigate future funding opportunities, including potential VDOT grants, to allow the County to improve the park and facilitate the multimodal transportation opportunities to connect citizens to Darden Towe Park and destinations beyond.

Recommendations

Staff recommends that the Board of Supervisors support the permanent closure and discontinuance of Free Bridge Lane to vehicular traffic and transform the space into a people-centered promenade and shared use path. This includes sending a petition of discontinuance to the VDOT Residency (Attachment C), supporting an exception for a permanent maintenance easement for VDOT, and supporting staff contracting out cost estimates for future projects. If the Board of Supervisors supports discontinuance, staff will return later this fall with a Resolution in Support of Discontinuance.

Attachments

- Attachment B: Free Bridge Feasibility Study
- Attachment C: Albemarle County VDOT Discontinuance Letter