

**I-295/I-76/Rt 42 Direct Connection
New Jersey Department of Transportation
Public Information Center
Bellmawr, NJ
Thursday July 24, 2003
3:00 PM–8:30 PM**

Summary of the Meeting

Introduction

Over 250 members of the general public and 5 elected officials attended the second Public Information Center conducted for The New Jersey Department of Transportation I-295/I-76/Rt 42 Direct Connection Project on Thursday July 24, 2003 at Bellmawr Ballroom in Bellmawr, NJ. The Center was advertised to begin at 3PM and end at 8:30PM, with the first formal presentation beginning at 4PM and the second at 7PM. During both sessions, attendees were invited to review boards and handouts, as well as review maps of the project area and offer suggestions on potential roadway improvements. A formal presentation was given at each session by Michael Russo, New Jersey Department of Transportation Supervising Engineer. This was followed by an informal question and answer period, after which each session was adjourned.

Comments and questions generally fell into the following broad categories:

- Traffic and congestion
- Roadway issues
- Alternatives
- Property issues
- Construction
- Other
- Comments

Replies to comments and questions were made by members of the NJDOT Project Team, led by Mr. Russo. The following is a summary of the comments (C), questions (Q) and replies (R) raised at the meeting.

Traffic and Congestion

C: This project will create increased traffic on local roads. Currently accidents occur on Al Jo's curve and not within our community.

R: While this project was developed to address the accident rates on the Interstate, it may help mitigate some of the highway traffic that is currently being forced onto local roads. A direct connection will obviate the need of highway drivers to merge with other traffic and/or use local roads. Additionally, all needs and impacts need to be balanced.

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Prior to actual construction beginning, spot improvements will be made to the local roadways as appropriate to mitigate some of the existing and potential “cut thru” traffic impacts.

Q: What about the additional noise and air impacts that will result from this project?

R: Congestion contributes to pollution and if a direct connection is constructed the air and noise pollution will be lessened as the running speeds on the Interstate increase.

Q: Can you use a toll road and congestion pricing on the New Jersey Turnpike to induce trucks to use roads on off hours?

R: The New Jersey Turnpike Authority is reviewing that option.

Q: People that will benefit from this construction are just passing through. The town will become gridlocked.

R: Highway users are already diverting to local streets and impacting the local roadways within the town.. In addition the Town EMS, fire and police departments are responding to a large number of traffic incidents on the Interstate. The proposed improvements will reduce this burden to the town. At present the accident rate on the Interstate is seven times the state average for similar roadways statewide.

C: I-295 and Al Jo’s curve are congested for 2 hrs during each rush hour—am and pm. We should not disrupt communities for 4 hours worth of congestion.

R: As stated above the accident rate on the Interstate is seven times the state average which is not limited to the 4 hours a day of rush hour, but occurs throughout the entire day. Benefits to the town will include less “cut thru” congestion on local streets, a decrease in air pollution and a reduction in the cost to the town to provide emergency services in response to incidents on the Interstate.

C: Most traffic comes from other areas. I-295 is not the problem.

R: Traffic and Accident studies have identified this interchange as one of the most dangerous and congested in the state with major geometric improvements required.

Roadway

Q: Cars traveling on Route 55 are supposed to pass through instead of cutting across I-295 lanes. How will you ameliorate that problem?

R: The I-295/I-76/Rt 42 Direct Connection Project has been developed to eliminate the “cutting across” that is forced by the current sub-standard roadway geometry.

Q: How will the project improve driving conditions?

R: Accidents on the roadway occur because there is no direct connection on I-295. Mainline traffic must mix with traffic from Rt 42 and/or negotiate a low speed ramp. If a direct connection is built, it will eliminate the two most dangerous conditions (weaving and mixing of I-295 and Rt. 42 traffic and the low speed curve on the main line).

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C: A simple solution would be good signage to route people properly and leave the roadway as it is.

R: The traffic volume on the highways is very high, the roadway geometrics do not meet driver expectations and there is a high accident rate. Signage is not enough to mitigate all of these problems. Various alternatives, including the “no-build” option, will be assessed for effectiveness and impacts.

Q: What have we done to educate people about Al Jo’s curve?

R: There are warning signs along the roadway, but because of the roadway configuration does not meet driver expectation for a main line interstate highway there will most likely continue to be a high accident rate regardless of advance warning signage or enforcement.

Q: What is the possibility of making a series of overpasses?

R: Some of the discussions with engineers have involved partial overpasses and tunnels. These are details that will be pursued in the future.

Q: Have the impacts of properly maintaining I-295 been reviewed?

R: The analysis considers the costs and capabilities of maintaining alternatives, including the existing “No-Build” configuration.

Alternatives

Q: Is a tunnel option viable?

R: A tunnel is a possibility from an engineering perspective, but there are many other factors involved including right-of way, operational and maintenance and cost issues. Currently the NJDOT has built and operates tunnels in Trenton and Atlantic City.

Q: Can an overpass be built to save property along the right-of-way?

R: Some of the Alternatives are already 4 levels high. Building “up” causes a different set of impacts (including visual and noise) to the adjacent area.

Q: Will each alternative show which houses will be affected?

R: Once the long list of alternatives is reduced to a shorter list, we will determine the exact number and location of properties that will be affected by each alternative.

Q: Have you considered light, commuter or freight rail in lieu of highway reconstruction? Can we put in express lanes and not build anything?

R: A Transportation Investment Study was conducted in the 1990’s by the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC) to evaluate many possible transportation solutions. It concluded that the benefits of other solutions did not directly improve the I-295/I-76/Rt 42 interchange. We are currently working closely with PATCO with their study evaluating potential mass transit improvements to the region.

C: None of the alternatives show a change to the New Jersey Turnpike.

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R: The New Jersey Turnpike is currently studying a new interchange at Rt. 42. As determined by the 1999 Transportation Investment Study, improvements to the Interchange are required whether or not the Turnpike interchange is constructed, as both projects serve different needs

Q: How many alternatives are there and how many people will be affected?

A: We are currently evaluating 26 initial alternatives and will short list these down to a smaller number this fall. An approximate number of residents impacted is presently being determined. This number will be refined in subsequent portions of the project for the alternatives actually shortlisted. Some alternatives show very few impacts on homes, while others have a larger number of residences impacted but greater effects on wetlands or other natural environmental features. We evaluate the impacts and balance these equally. Because of myriad and varied issues within the study area it is like threading a needle.

Property Issues

Q: Do you have information about property takings for each alternative and are you considering the needs of Bellmawr Park?

R: All of the alternatives are still in the initial stages of development. The criteria matrix will help produce a short list of alternatives and we will bring those back to the community. The NJDOT understands that Bellmawr Park is a unique situation. We are getting a better understanding of how any potential property takings would be dealt with in this area.

Q: If Bellmawr Park has to be moved into a wooded area, will that be considered as taking a wetland area?

R: We do not know yet if Bellmawr Park will be affected nor how we would handle possible property issues in Bellmawr Park. Additionally, permits are required before any changes or construction commences. Therefore, wetlands issues would be addressed during that process.

Q: I received information that homes would be demolished and not relocated in Bellmawr Park. Is this true?

A: We do not know how many, if any, properties would be taken. We currently have 26 initial alternatives and possibly more following this meeting. A decision or discussion has yet to be held on mitigation of any potential taking in Bellmawr Park.

Q: Many people who live in the Bellmawr Mutual Houses community are on fixed incomes and cannot afford to move somewhere else. Will the homes be torn down or relocated?

R: We are still nearing the shortlist process for the alternatives and therefore we do not know if any homes in this community would be affected.

Q: How will the historical value of Bellmawr Park be evaluated?

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R: There are many historic resources in this area and they will be evaluated under the “Section 106” process. This refers to the federal review process designed to ensure that historic properties are considered during highway (and other) projects. The review process is administered by the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, an independent federal agency, with assistance from the New Jersey State Historic Preservation Office. Projects subject the section 106 review must try to avoid or mitigate effects on all historic building structures and archeological sites.

Q: If homes are taken, will there be adverse effects to adjacent homes and if so who will be responsible?

R: In some cases we may assume the cost of damages if homes are taken, but that is specific to the alternatives, which have not been chosen yet.

Q: Many people have invested and made improvements to their homes in Bellmawr Park. How will they be compensated for that?

R: The NJDOT understands that Bellmawr Park is a unique situation. We are getting a better understanding of how any potential property takings would be dealt with in this area. A decision or discussion has yet to be held on mitigation of any potential taking in Bellmawr Park.

Q: What would you do if an alternative is chosen that goes through the cemetery?

R: All impacts are analyzed and weighed during the alternatives shortlisting process, including those to the cemetery. If an alternative were chosen that did impact the cemetery, provisions would be made to minimize and or compensate any adverse impacts.

Construction

Q: The Woodrow Willson Bridge (near Washington, DC) took 8 years to repair. Why will this project go any faster?

R: The Woodrow Willson Bridge is substantially larger than this project with more difficult construction, staging and permitting impacts. When we get a better idea of what kind of changes and reconstruction will be done, we will have a better idea of how long the improvements will take. Currently, we are assuming 2 years.

Q: Will noise barriers be installed?

R: Noise barriers in this area were installed as part of an earlier project. Additional barriers may be considered as noise impact mitigation. The public will have input, if they are installed, on where they would be located..

Q: How will you mitigate construction impacts in a town with small roads and communities?

R: We are currently planning to perform computer simulations of traffic on the local streets and perform spot improvements where necessary to alleviate negative impacts.

Other

Q: Will this project interfere with other projects?

R: The Missing Moves project is adjacent to the study area of the I-295/I-76/Rt 42 Direct Connection project, but it is a separate project. The Missing Moves project is currently in the design phase and its construction should be completed prior to construction of the interchange starting. As the time for construction gets closer the DOT will coordinate their other NJDOT projects, as well as those planned by the county, to minimize conflicts.

C: (From State Senator George Geist) He thanked NJDOT for coming and asked when they would be coming again and when the community could expect answers to the many questions raised. He also asked that a notice be sent to all PIC attendees regarding the next public meeting.

R: A shortlisting process will begin soon. In the fall we will meet with the CAC and with local officials to discuss the process and shortlisted alternatives. Sometime near the end of 2003 or early 2004, we will have another public meeting to discuss the shortlisted alternatives. All PIC attendees that signed in will be added to the project mailing list and therefore will receive project information and meeting notices.

Q: Does NJDOT have a master plan that encompasses all modes of transportation?

R: There is a long-term transportation plan and capital investment strategy available on the NJDOT website. The investment strategy includes all types of transportation options. Funding for projects is divided equally between highway and mass transit. There is also a 2025 plan that includes rail and bus options.

C: Wetlands are not more important than homes.

R: Wetlands must be evaluated as well as impacts to homeowners. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires that a wide variety of environmental issues be examined, including wetlands and property rights.

Q: What is the allocation for the budget?

R: The initial budget is \$100-200 million depending on the final alternative and design selected.

Q: What surveys have been done?

R: Many surveys have been done and are progressing including, ground surveys (for ground contour), wetlands, traffic and environmental.