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I-295/I-76/NJ 42 Reconstruction Partnering Meeting

June 18, 2003

PBA Hall Barrington, NJ

Introduction

Mike Russo of the New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) welcomed attendees to the meeting. He outlined the importance of the project and the partnering session to NJDOT. The goals and objectives of the project were reviewed and past, present, and future public outreach efforts were discussed.

Presentation

Mr. Russo introduced Bub Kovacs of Dewberry, who served as the meeting facilitator. Dr. Kovacs asked participants to introduce themselves and summarize their expectations for the partnering session. The outcome of the last partnering session was reviewed, followed by a brief review of the goals of this session: To provide a project update, to discuss key issues facing the project, and to bring together the diverse group of stakeholders who have an interest in this project. The agenda was then reviewed and approved.

Lou Robbins of Dewberry expressed gratitude to participants for their continued support of the study process. He reviewed the project progress to date and discussed the future schedule, all of which were captured in a flow chart. Mr. Robbins noted that the schedule is flexible, but did highlight that the Draft Environmental Impact Statement is intended to be completed in October 2004, with eventual construction to begin in 2008. The project's goals and objectives were discussed. Charlie Meidhof of Dewberry then discussed the initial alternatives that have been generated to date, as a result of technical and public input.

Brainstorming and Breakouts

Following a brief intermission, Dr. Kovacs reconvened the meeting with a brainstorming session identifying all current possible project issues to completion. Participants then discussed all the issues identified and clarified their meaning.

After lunch, attendees were asked to break into four groups, where they would each focus on three critical issues. Participants were asked to define the issue and identify possible ways in which to address the issue.

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Summary of Issues and Possible Solutions

Overall Issue: How to Reach Consensus

- **Issue 1:** How to improve driver conditions on the Interstate while responding to the concerns of nearby residents and other stakeholders.
- **Issue 2:** Special Interest groups are not agreeable and could stop the project.
- **Issue 3:** Need to capture community vision, listen to everyone, and leave area better than it was originally.
- **Issue 4:** Important to success to show early benefits

Potential Solutions: Share information. Preserve the integrity and credibility of the process, Negotiate honestly. Strive for collective compromise. Maintain education, partnering, communication and outreach. Continue to work together. Make sure the eventual solution deals with long-term needs. Missing Moves project and some part so this project would happen early and help alleviate some problems.

Overall Issue: Dealing with Natural Resources

- **Issue 1:** It is likely that natural resources will be affected by many alternatives
- **Issue 2:** Try not to touch the wetlands, or at least minimize wetlands impacts.

Potential Solutions: Upgrade any remaining natural resources. Since it was asserted that 2/3 of created wetlands in New Jersey fail, avoid affecting wetlands. On the other hand, restore new wetlands by eliminating Al Jo's curve and putting them at that site. Use piles for any new construction in wetlands. Handles storm water where it originates – on the highway.

Overall Issue: Dealing with Parks and Recreational Resources

- **Issue 1:** Concerned that Shining Star Park would be affected by some alternatives. This park is dedicated to a local woman and local firefighters who died recently in the area.
- **Issue 2:** Parks and ball fields will be affected.

Potential Solutions: If the alternatives shortlisted impact the park, a discussion of the potential mitigated alternatives with the local community leaders associated with the park will be undertaken.

Overall Issue: Construction Impacts

- **Issue 1:** Impact of construction on local streets
- **Issue 2:** Safety and congestion during construction

Potential Solutions: New Jersey has the best safety record in the U.S. for roadway construction. Make improvements to local streets (e.g., signals, turning lanes, etc) prior to Interstate reconstruction.

Overall Issue: Property Issues

- **Issue 1:** Loss of ratables
- **Issue 2:** Loss of potential development sites from property takings

Potential Solutions: Mitigate to the greatest extent possible impacts to private property takings.

Overall Issue: Design Issues

- **Issue 1:** Relax design standards to minimize costs and impacts

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- **Issue 2:** Compress the ramps in Initial Alternative C

Potential Solutions: Design flexibility can be shown. Consider Initial Alternative D vs. C.

Overall Issue: Other Impacts

- **Issue 1:** Minimize financial impacts on municipalities.
- **Issue 2:** Providing emergency response on elevated structures and tunnels
- **Issue 3:** Visual and noise impacts of elevated, multi-level highway
- **Issue 4:** Impacts on cultural/historic resources

Potential Solutions: Train emergency response personnel on elevated structure/tunnel conditions. Employ permanent, full-time emergency response teams. Install tall trees near the edges of communities. Avoid taking cultural/historic resources or, if impossible, document those sites.

Discussion

Following the review of issues and solutions, Dr. Kovacs facilitated a general discussion. Questions and comments were raised by anyone. Answers were given by a number of different members of the NJDOT Project Team, including Mr. Russo, Mr. Robbins, Mr. Meidhof and Dr. Kovacs. Questions and answers have been grouped into categories, not necessarily reflecting the order in which questions were asked or responses given

1. Construction

Question (Q): What plan will be put in place for the hours of construction, in order to alleviate congestion during peak hours?

Answer (A): Two theories are being explored: a) high intensity construction, where there is significant disruption for a short period of time or b) low intensity construction, where disruption is minimized but for a much longer period. In the end, both methods will probably have to be used for various construction stages. Regardless, every effort will be made to minimize construction impacts and disruptions during peak periods.

Q: Wouldn't the "Missing Moves" project impact construction?

A: "Missing Moves" will have minimal construction impacts. Further, construction on that project is scheduled to begin in two years and will be finished before this one starts.

2. Overall Goals, Alternatives and Related Projects

Q: Is the goal to relieve congestion on Route 322?

A: The Route 322 region will be impacted. People traveling from Pennsylvania to the Jersey Shore may utilize this roadway. Improvements to "Missing Moves" will mitigate congestion on Route 322.

Q: Why is the study area limited?

A: The study area is constrained due to the project's specific nature. It has precise purpose and needs and addresses direct connection. There are many projects out there being done simultaneously and we can't include them all.

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Q: Very little traffic is generated around the New Jersey Turnpike Interchange 3. Couldn't the Turnpike be better linked to I-295 at Interchange 3 for better use of resources? It is silly for NJ Turnpike to do its own widening project when extra capacity exists south of I-295.

A: The Turnpike conducted its own study involving a connection at Route 42.

Q: Benigno Boulevard is a very heavily traveled road during the day. Isn't there a need for a left signal onto Blackhorse Pike from Benigno Boulevard?

A: Currently there are other NJDOT studies in process in this area. One of things being considered is improving Route 168 and Benigno Boulevard.

Comment (C): I don't hear enough about improving drivers' expectations and safety on the Interstate as the reason for doing this study.

A: Improving safety and driver expectation are key items in our purpose and need statement. But we have to consider many other factors as well, which is one reason that we are looking at a broad range of alternatives.

Q: Can Al Jo's curve be pulled in? Consideration needs to be given to safety and emergency response personnel. When emergency vehicles are on the road, you should regulate lower speeds.

A: A curve cannot be just "pulled in". A 1,400-foot turn radius is needed for safe driving conditions. For our alternatives, we are assuming a design speed of 55 miles per hour, which is less than the typical Interstate design speed of 65 miles per hour, but which reflects all the various constraints in the area.

Q: At the last Advisory Committee Meeting a discussion was held about showing an alternative that paralleled the Turnpike. Has this been developed?

A: We have examined traffic volumes remaining on the interchange. If an alternative that paralleled the Turnpike is considered, the remaining volume still present safety and congestion issues.

C: Build a new interchange between Exits 3 and 4 and connect to I-295, this would remove much of the traffic.

A: As said before, this would not solve the problems of Al Jo's curve

C: Can you tunnel under the cemetery?

A: There is not enough room to bring a tunnel up to the surface safely

3. Property Issues

Q: Have you looked at taking homes for dollar value?

A: Federal law requires that we offer appraised value for homes. But, if property takings are necessary, we can give compensate the difference between the houses' worth and cost to replace the home.

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C: You could save more in project by paying more for homes than by avoiding them.

A: If houses are going to be hit, people will be contacted. But saving money is not the sole consideration when deciding whether to take property or not.

Q: How many other projects have cut through a cemetery? Has this been accepted by the community in those settings?

A: At the Secaucus Interchange, a cemetery was impacted – the deceased were re-entered. Cemetery takings are not a common occurrence.

Q: Can you buy land for the cemetery as an alternative site?

A: We would have to pay damages to the cemetery owners. Purchasing land directly to give to the owner is not something typically allowed.

4. Environmental Issues

Q: Could you provide an explanation of the NEPA goals and process? Why are we following it? Who makes the final recommendations?

A: The NEPA process is required. It offers an explanation of the project, its impacts, and helps to understand the study process. NJDOT and the Federal Highway Administration make the final recommendations. We have obtained quite a bit of feedback from previous meetings held. By the time the Environmental Impact Statement is finished, we hope to have consensus by choice. The NEPA process requires that certain things be examined (e.g., noise impact, design criteria, etc.). The goal is to do the best job with the least amount of impacts to the environment. The process shows what will be done and defines mitigation techniques to cause fewer impacts.

Q: What about water? And quality of life? Are they factors to be considered in this process?

A: Yes, both are among many areas for which impacts are studied. .

Q: Could a tunnel be built below the water table?

A: Yes. Two other tunnels have been built recently in New Jersey. One of which is in Atlantic City adjacent to the Penrose Canal, is also between the water table.

C: There are concerns about water quality issue – remediation, retention/detention; wetland mitigation.

A: One of our goals is to leave the environment better than it is now.

C: Installing trees as a sound barrier would only block the view, not the sound

C: Avoiding minimization and mitigation of wetlands will be a very difficult process in this case. You need to explain it very well, since the public will have a hard time understanding the wetland issue. Avoidance measures should be explored at first, then consider mitigation.

5. Study Area/Maps

Q: Why is the study area limited?

A: The study area is constrained due to the project's specific nature. It has precise

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purpose and needs and addresses direct connection. There are many projects out there being done simultaneously and we can't include them all.

C: You need to show an existing conditions map.

A: Suggestions have been made to improve these graphics for the public. These current maps highlight where roads cross each other.

Adjournment

Mike Russo thanked participants for their involvement in the project and stressed the need for NJDOT and stakeholders to continue working together.