



PUBLIC INFORMATIONAL MEETING MEETING (PIM) #2

Meeting Summary

Date: October 23, 2019

Norwalk City Hall - Community Room

Time: 6:30pm

Welcome

Michael Calabrese, of the Connecticut Department of Transportation (CTDOT), welcomed everyone to the 2nd Public Information Meeting for the Route 7/15 Norwalk Project. He explained that the meeting would review where the project has been, the alternatives screening process, current alternatives being considered, and the environmental documentation process.

Meeting Overview

Michael C. reviewed the meeting's agenda items:

1. Introductions
2. Project Overview
3. Where We Have Been
4. Remaining Alternatives
5. Environmental Documentation Process
6. Schedule

Project Overview

After introductions, Michael C. explained the limits of the project area and discussed the missing connections between the Merritt Parkway and Route 7. He also discussed the crash history at interchanges 39 and 40.

Where We Have Been

Michael C. gave a history of the project, beginning in the 1990's with the development of more than 20 alternatives. A recommended alternative was advanced through an Environmental Assessment (EA) to construction. He explained that a lawsuit halted construction on this preferred alternative in 2006. Following the lawsuit, a Stakeholder Advisory Committee was formed to identify a supported alternative. A new alternative, Alternative 21C, was supported by the community. The project, however, was put on hold in 2009 due to a lack of funds. The project effort was reinitiated in 2016, and a Project Advisory Committee (PAC) was formed. Michael C. explained its role and composition, including its role in developing the project's Purpose and Need.



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John Eberle, of Stantec, explained that the Project Team developed a Needs and Deficiencies Report to first understand the issues and concerns within the project area. He urged people to visit the website to read the full document. He explained that the major deficiencies identified in the report are the missing Route 7/Merritt Parkway connections, the high number of crashes within the project area and substandard geometry amongst other issues.

John E. indicated that the next step in the project development process was to create the Purpose and Need Statement, for which the PAC provided assistance. He explained that the Purpose and Need Statement identifies the needs and underlying goals of the project and serves as the baseline for evaluating "must haves" that address the needs for an alternative being considered. The Purpose and Need Statement was presented to regulatory agencies in 2017. Additional refinements occurred given feedback, and the current version was revised in September 2018.

John E. explained that after understanding the deficiencies of the corridor and development of the Purpose and Need Statement, the next step was to reach out to the public to gain valuable feedback and local insights on the corridor. Two years ago, CTDOT hosted its first Public Information and Scoping Meeting, which was that effort to introduce the project to the community and obtain feedback on the project and the scope of work to be undertaken. The Project Team received many comments of which John E. summarized a few of the key ones (e.g. concern with signals on Route 7, discussion on the missing connections, environmental resource impact concerns etc). John E. again suggested that the project website has extensive information on that meeting including minutes, the meeting summary report and the actual presentation.

Remaining Alternatives

John E. said that the Project Team began the alternatives analysis process with 28 alternatives, most of which were developed from the previous project in the 2000's. He explained that CTDOT could have simply restarted the new project and gone forward with the previously preferred alternative (21C), but the decision was made to consider all previously discarded alternatives in light of the newly developed Purpose and Need. He then discussed the screening process, beginning with the Level 1 Screening. Under the Level 1 Screening, if an alternative did not meet the Purpose and Need, it could not move forward and must be discarded. The results of the Level 1 Screening were presented in a matrix to show how each alternative met or did not meet the Purpose and Need. Four of the 28 alternatives met the Purpose and Need and were carried forward into a Level 2 Screening. John E. used Alternative #4 as an example of an alternative that did not meet the 'mobility' criteria (no connections between Route 7 and Main Ave.) and therefore was discarded. He pointed out that the matrix showed most of the previous alternatives failed the mobility criteria and were discarded.

Of the 4 build alternatives that passed the Level 1 screening, John E. explained that one of them was identified as Alternative 21D. He explained that this was an alternative that previously was the preferred Alternative 21C from 2009, but refined to improve geometry and combine several of the proposed bridges. Alternative 12A and 20B were two other previous alternatives that were reexamined. The fourth alternative to pass the screening was Alternative 26 which introduced the addition of two signalized intersections on Route 7. He explained that the presentation reflected a matrix that included



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the "no build" option which the team is required to assess all the alternatives against, as required under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

John E. explained that the project team next began a Level 2 Screening on the 4 remaining alternatives. He explained that the Level 2 Screening criteria were identified and then discussed and agreed to by the PAC. John E. gave a brief overview of the Level 2 screening criteria (i.e. compatibility with regional initiatives, construction costs, maintenance costs, integrating project roadways into environmental/neighborhood context, elevated ramps, potential impacts to Norwalk River, proximity of ramps to neighborhoods, construction duration and direct archaeological resource impact). He noted that one criterion titled "Elevated Ramps" was used to identify any alternative that incorporated ramps or roadways elevated higher than the Parkway as this was deemed to be a flaw given past stakeholder opposition to this. The Level 2 Screening Matrix results were displayed showing how each alternative was graded on the various criteria. John E. explained that after screening evaluation, Alternatives 20B and 12A were eliminated from further consideration and Alternatives 21D and 26 moved forward per the PAC's consensus.

Q: What is the reason for traffic signals on Route 7?

A: John E. said that the Western Connecticut Council of Governments (WestCOG) performed a past study, which suggested that a "boulevard concept" may be appropriate for Route 7. Given this initial suggestion, CTDOT determined that it was worthwhile to more fully detail and investigate this concept to understand if this should be an alternative to be considered. The Project Team then developed some concepts on a signalized Route 7 to determine if the concept could work. An initial traffic analysis indicated that the alternative worked from a traffic perspective, so it remained as an alternative to be considered. The traffic signals in Alternative 26 allow for at-grade access at Route 7 to Main Avenue and the Merritt Parkway.

Q: Will travel time be assessed?

A: Yes, as part of the EA, the Project Team will have more information on traffic to share with the public.

John E. continued and displayed a 3D design visualization model of the project alternatives, toggling between existing conditions, Alternative 21D and Alternative 26 from different perspectives. He discussed the missing connections and how each alternative addressed those linkages. He explained that Alternative 21D had a larger footprint than Alternative 26.

Q: Why wasn't Route 7 constructed as a completed interchange in the 90s?

A: The Project Team had no clear answer.

Q: How will Alternative 21D affect traffic?



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A: The goal of all alternatives is to provide direct connections between Route 7 and the Merritt Parkway which should divert traffic off the local roads, thereby improving traffic operations for the local road network.

Q: The area behind Main Avenue (southwest of the Merritt Parkway/Main Avenue interchange) is park-like and has a serene feel. Will there be more noise, pollution, or extra traffic?

A: These factors are being assessed during the EA process.

Q: For Alternative 26, what will happen to the cloverleaf ramps that are no longer used?

A: Along Route 7, one of them will be removed, and the other (north of Parkway) will be adapted and integrated into the new alignment.

Q: Will the Main Avenue interchange be altered as part of the various alternatives?

A: The interchange will be different than it is currently. The alternatives all address the interchange essentially the same way. Today, there is considerable traffic that travels on Main Avenue to make the connection between Route 7 and the Merritt Parkway. In the build alternatives, traffic will not need to use Main Avenue because these missing connections will be constructed. The substandard existing ramps will generally be removed as part of the project and new connections constructed.

Q: If Super 7 is not going to go all the way to Danbury, is this necessary now?

A: We're looking at future traffic projections and traffic conditions in the area will deteriorate. We can make this area better from a traffic perspective and the goal of the project is to improve conditions over what traffic condition might exist if nothing were done.

Q: Were autonomous vehicles considered?

A: They have not been considered at this time. We are aware of the discussion concerning autonomous vehicles however there is limited information at this time.

Environmental Documentation Process

Paul Stanton, of FHI, discussed the Environmental Documentation Process and how the project must comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Connecticut Environmental Policy Act (CEPA). He explained that Alternatives 21D and 26 will be analyzed in the EA document and that Purpose and Need is the foundation of the EA. Paul S. said they are currently in the preparation phase, and they will conduct a public hearing after a draft document is prepared and made available for public review. They will look at many factors, including environmental, wetlands, natural resources, endangered species, and greenhouse gases, the built environment, socio-economic factors, noise, traffic community cohesion, and cultural resources, among other things.



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Paul S. next discussed the interrelationship of the Section 106 (National Historic Preservation Act) State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) coordination process with the NEPA Process and explained that after identifying key Section 106 stakeholders and consulting parties, and identifying historic/cultural resources within the project area, we are now at the stage of assessing project/alternative impacts to those historic/Section 106 resources.

Paul S. concluded by describing the process for determining the preferred alternative and how that information will be presented in the future.

Schedule

Andy F. discussed the project schedule. Construction is expected to begin in 2024. He showed a map depicting other projects currently or soon-to-be underway in the Norwalk Region, explaining that many of these projects are expected to be completed by the time construction on the Route 7-15 Project is slated to begin. He also mentioned that the Project Team is coordinating with projects adjacent to the 7-15 project.

Andy F. suggested that the next public meeting concerning this project would be in 2020 after the draft EA document is released for public comment.

Q: Is there a timeline or cost projection for construction?

A: There is still much design work to complete. Costs and schedule may shift as the design progresses. This is presumed to be a three-year construction project, with a cost of \$100M to \$200M depending on the alternative selected.

Q: Is it guaranteed that funding will be available?

A: The State currently has funding for the EA, engineering and Rights of Way. At this time there are no funds programmed for the construction phase.

Q: Traffic on Main Avenue is already a problem. Will the Creeping Hemlock ramp disappear?

A: The Creeping Hemlock on ramp to access southbound Merritt Parkway will be removed. The Creeping Hemlock, Main Ave/Glover Ave intersection will be realigned with a new signal proposed at the new intersection. The southbound Merritt Parkway off ramp to Creeping Hemlock will remain with improvements incorporated.

Comment: There is a considerable amount of new roadway and maintenance required for Alternative 21D. With Route 7 not going to Danbury, I don't think Route 7 needs to be a freeway. Alternative 26 would provide better connections between people and communities.

Q: Will you be identifying those proposed improvements that are the same for both alternatives?



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Response: That information will be described in the environmental document.

Q: Are there going to be bicycle and pedestrian changes in the project area?

A: Our goal is to provide bicycle and pedestrian facilities along Main Avenue within the project area and towards the rail station along Glover Avenue. The Project Team is also coordinating with WestCOG on their study of Main Avenue.

Comment: The plan should include the Norwalk River Valley Trail (NRVT) and the Merritt Parkway Trail. This area can become a significant regional trail intersection. The commenter felt that CTDOT will not allow an at-grade crossing at Grist Mill (as currently envisioned in the NRVT plan) to the north and west of the interchange and so CTDOT should consider a trail option that utilizes the Grist Mill bridge (tunnel) and routes south on Glover and through the Metro North tunnel at Merritt Parkway, eventually connecting to Perry Avenue. The commenter continued that while he understood a CTDOT rails representative rejected the use of the MNRR tunnel (at Glover Ave) for a trail, that should not stop the attempt to do so as this was critical to the trail success and connecting this area with the downtown Norwalk area.

Q: As autonomous vehicles are to be a reality, can you explain why they are not being considered as part of this project?

A: Information on autonomous vehicles is currently limited. As more guidelines and policies become established, that information will be considered as the project moves forward.

Comment: A member of the PAC Committee read a prepared statement in which she expressed her preference for Alternative 21D. See attached submitted text.

The meeting concluded and attendees were invited to stay to look at the 3D models of the alternatives.