

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Context

The South Medford Interchange Project area is located within the City of Medford in Jackson County, Oregon (Figure 1-1). South Medford has a combination of commercial, industrial, residential, and recreational land uses. The existing South Medford Interchange links Interstate 5 (I-5) and Barnett Road, and is one of Medford's two interchanges with I-5. The existing South Medford Interchange does not meet current design standards and experiences congestion that is expected to increase substantially in the future.

Overview

Beginning in 1998, the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) initiated a collaborative process to identify a solution to transportation problems that exist at the South Medford Interchange. A key element of the process was the formation of a Solution Team that included representatives from the American Automobile Association, Oregon Truckers Association, Chamber of Commerce, several stakeholders from the Medford area, local governmental representatives, ODOT, FHWA, and other transportation professionals. The Solution Team used a collaborative process to identify and define the transportation problems and to develop and evaluate alternatives for solving the problems. They conducted this work following the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and related regulations and guidelines.

ODOT also established a Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) to advise the project Solution Team. The CAC and the Solution Team provided input to ODOT and FHWA

regarding the purpose and need for the project. The CAC and the Solution Team also worked with ODOT and FHWA to develop project evaluation criteria, as well as multiple potential solutions to meet the project's purpose and need.

A team of specialists prepared several technical documents to aid in reviewing the alternatives with respect to a wide range of environmental, traffic, and engineering concerns. In October 2001, ODOT and the FHWA issued a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) identifying two alternative solutions to the transportation problems. The Build Alternatives discussed in the DEIS included the Highland Alternative and the Ellendale Alternative. The No-Build Alternative also was discussed in the DEIS, as required by NEPA.

The DEIS designated the Highland Alternative to be the "Preferred Alternative", based upon preliminary information suggesting that it would best meet the purpose and need for the project. After consideration of the DEIS and public and agency comments on the document, the Solution Team, following the unanimous recommendation from the CAC, chose the Highland Alternative as the locally preferred alternative and recommended to ODOT and FHWA that it be advanced as the Preferred Alternative to be evaluated by the FEIS. ODOT and FHWA concurred and forwarded this alternative into this FEIS as a solution to the transportation problems that exist at the interchange.

Subsequent to its decision to designate the Preferred Alternative for advancement to the FEIS, ODOT modified its engineering and design analysis for the project in response to public comments and agency comments and concerns regarding permitting requirements. ODOT continued to coordinate with

regulatory agencies, the CAC Sub-team on Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety, and property owners with property adjacent to the project, to resolve environmental and other issues. Consequently, some refinements were made to the Preferred Alternative design. The Preferred Alternative footprint remains fundamentally the same as the Highland Alternative as discussed in the DEIS

No sooner than thirty days after issuance of this FEIS and after completion of ESA consultation, FHWA anticipates issuance of a Record of Decision (ROD) that will document their formal selection of an alternative to address transportation problems at the existing interchange. Prior to construction of improvements, any selected build alternative would go through further environmental planning, permitting, engineering, and design. These activities would be site-specific and would follow the project that is described in this FEIS and would be described in the ROD.

Purpose and Need

The purpose and need are summarized below.

The purpose of the proposed South Medford Interchange Project is to improve the safe and efficient movement of goods, people, and services at and within the I-5/Barnett Road interchange area. The long-term improvements are intended to reduce congestion and improve the operation of the interchange in a manner that would minimize adverse impacts to neighborhoods, businesses, and the environment.

The following needs are the basis for the proposed action:

- Maintain the primary function of the interchange and I-5 to provide safe and efficient inter-regional and regional travel;

- Address the congestion and associated safety problems at the interchange, resulting from the fact that both local and regional traffic use the interchange, not just to access I-5 but also for east-west movements across the freeway on Barnett Road. Local trips generated by current and planned land uses need to be accommodated in a safe and efficient fashion that serves the community;
- Provide improved connectivity for bicycle and pedestrian facilities.
- Support future traffic that would be generated by projected growth and land use changes that are described in City of Medford's Comprehensive Plan; and
- Protect future operations of the interchange and surrounding freeway sections from unacceptable congestion and safety problems.

Organization of Document

The Preferred Alternative that is discussed in this FEIS is fundamentally the same as the Preferred Alternative that was discussed in the DEIS. For example, the center of the interchange would remain the same, and the connector streets would follow the same basic alignments. Although some details have changed to mitigate impacts and respond to new information, the overall potential for impacts to the natural and human environment would be quite similar to those described in the DEIS.

Consequently, this document follows the condensed format for an FEIS, and adopts the DEIS, as amended within this document.

Chapter One of this FEIS provides a brief discussion of the project's context, development overview, synopsis of the purpose and need, and overall organization of the document.

Chapter Two summarizes the process of developing and defining the alternatives that were considered in the DEIS. This chapter also describes the Preferred Alternative, focusing on the differences between the DEIS Preferred Alternative and the FEIS Preferred Alternative.

Chapter Three lists changes to conditions and information that have occurred since the DEIS was prepared; for example, corrections or additions in response to agency comments. Chapter Three also provides discussions on short-term use and long-term productivity, as well as irreversible and irretrievable commitment of resources related to construction and operation of the project.

Chapter Four provides a summary of mitigation and conservation measures that would be implemented under the Preferred Alternative.

Chapter Five summarizes public involvement conducted for the project, focusing on activities that occurred since publication of the DEIS.

Chapter Six is the Final Section 4(f) Evaluation and Associated Section 6(f) Assessment.

Chapter Seven is a summary of written and oral comments and ODOT's and FHWA's responses to those comments. Several appendices provide supportive documentation for the EIS process. Appendix A provides the complete written and oral comments on the DEIS. Appendix B lists the Technical Reports and Memoranda Prepared for this project. Appendix C provides correspondence from agency coordination. Appendix D lists the preparers who worked on the DEIS and FEIS. Appendix E is a bibliography of

information sources used. Appendix F lists the agencies, organizations, and individuals who received copies of the DEIS. Appendix G provides copies of the Section 106 Documentation Forms. Appendix H provides a copy of the ODOT Standard Specifications 00280 and 00290. Appendix I contains the goals and evaluation criteria used in the decision-making process for choosing the Highland Alternative.

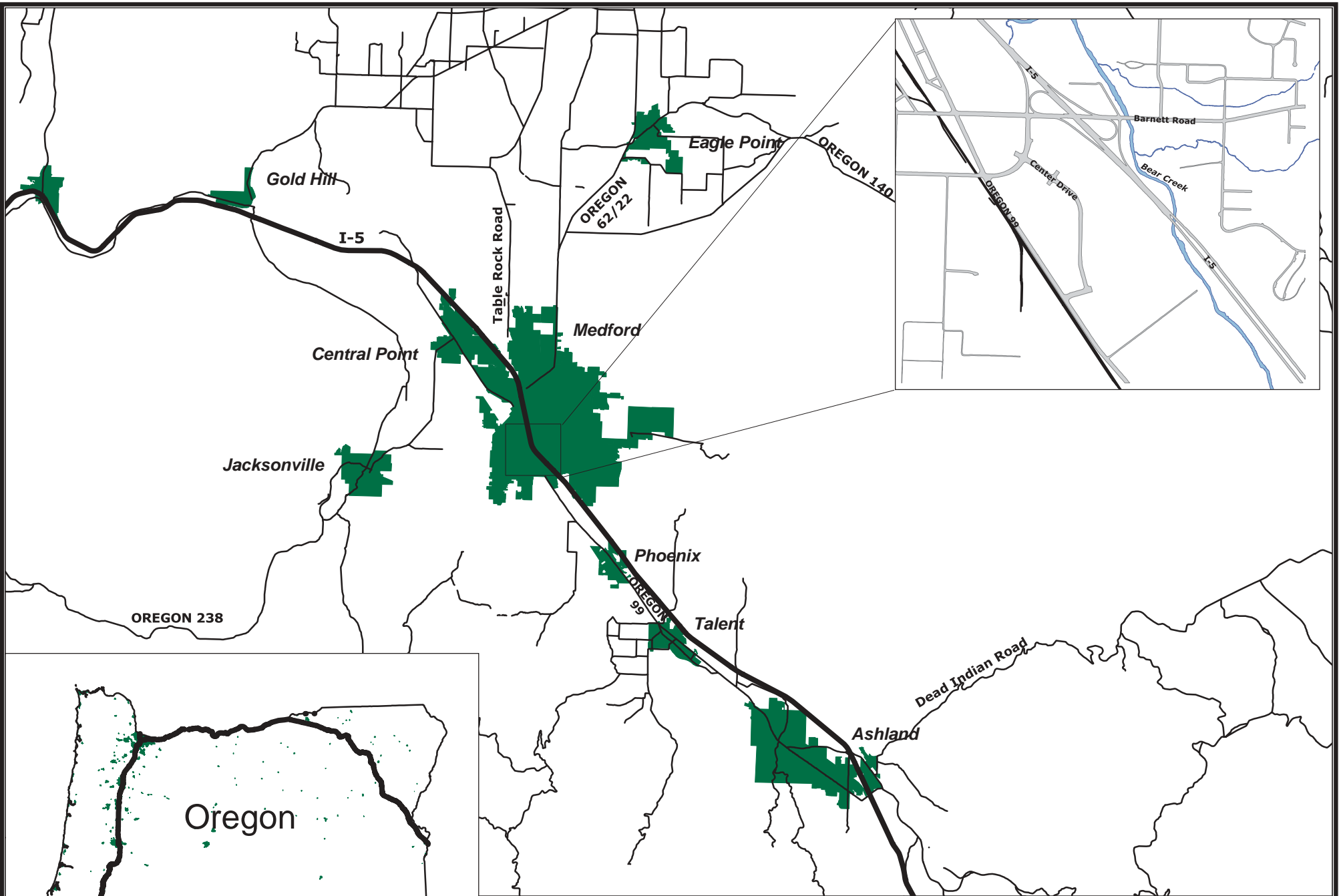


Figure 1-1
 Project Vicinity Map

