

CHAPTER 5. PUBLIC AND AGENCY INVOLVEMENT PROCESS

This chapter briefly describes the public involvement, public outreach activities, and agency coordination undertaken by the Rogue Valley Council of Governments (RVCOG), ODOT, and project staff, prior to issuance of the DEIS in October 2001 (a detailed discussion is contained in Chapter 6 of the DEIS). The chapter also addresses public and agency involvement activities since the release of the South Medford Interchange DEIS.

Solution Team

The Solution Team was made up of local citizens; representatives from AAA, Oregon Truckers Association, and the Greater Medford Chamber of Commerce; local officials; and ODOT and FHWA personnel. The Solution Team members worked together to define the transportation problem, develop alternative concepts, define project goals, and create evaluation criteria for the alternatives. The project goals that the team set out to meet included transportation goals, as well as social, economic, planning, parks and recreation, and biological goals. The Solution Team took its project development direction from ODOT and FHWA statutes, regulations, and guidance.

Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC)

RVCOG solicited volunteers for a Citizen Advisory Committee in a January 1999 informational mailing to 593 people. Approximately 20 percent addressees responded to the mailing, with about half offering to serve on the CAC. Nineteen candidates representing a range of backgrounds, interests, activities and concerns were selected. After interviews, 16

candidates were asked to serve on the CAC. All accepted. Members represented east and west Medford neighborhoods and community interests that included: bicyclists, pedestrians, low-income households, the handicapped, business, the elderly, rural areas, commuters, parkland, and safety.

The CAC held its first meeting in February 1999, and met 15 times during the study process, typically on a monthly basis. The committee served as a communication link to the public. It acted as a forum for getting project information out to the public, fostering public discussion about interchange needs and potential solutions, and channeling public comment to the Solution Team. The CAC process produced important information used in the design and evaluation of project alternatives. The CAC took its direction from ODOT, FHWA, and the Solution Team.

CAC Meeting

The objective of the October 17, 2001, CAC meeting included reviewing the project DEIS Executive Summary and the official public comment process.

With the distribution of the DEIS a formal comment period began. Copies of the DEIS were mailed to interested parties, and copies were made available from ODOT. The Executive Summary was also posted on the project web site. An open house and hearing was to be held on October 30, 2001. The CAC discussed the alternatives in the DEIS and their possible impacts including right of way impacts, road capacity, loss of housing, and access issues.

Members of the public attended and were encouraged to comment at the end of the meeting. Approximately six people

commented on topics that included concern about additional traffic on Highland Drive, project funding, and the possibility of a third interchange.

Public Hearing on DEIS

The project team conducted an open-house style public meeting/hearing on the DEIS between 4:30 and 7:30 p.m. on October 30, 2001, at the Scottish Rite Center, Medford, Oregon. Attendees were able to make comments at the hearing to a court recorder. Forty-six people commented. The deadline for written comments was December 3, 2001.

On January 3, 2002, FHWA granted an extension to the comment period for the DEIS, acting on requests from the public for more time to learn about and comment on the document. These requests included comments that the public knew too little about the project. The extension period lasted until January 14, 2002.

Public Open House on DEIS

An Open House was held on January 8, 2002, between 5:00 and 7:00 p.m. at the Medford Armory in response to public requests for more dialogue about alternatives assessed in the DEIS. The event was organized to present project information, discuss the alternatives, and answer questions. Special stations were used to provide additional information and help explain issues that the public felt were important, such as the South Stage Road interchange concept, how the interchange would operate, and the potential traffic impacts to neighborhoods. Copies of the Executive Summary and the DEIS were available.

Public Comments on DEIS

Approximately 340 DEIS comments were received from individuals, groups, and agencies. Forty-six people commented at the October 30, 2001, Public Hearing.

Categories of DEIS comments included, but were not limited to, impacts to park access and property (particularly Bear Creek Park), increase in air pollutants, construction of a SPUI over Bear Creek, concern over hazardous materials, sensible growth management, disruption to homes and neighborhoods due to increased traffic and associated secondary impacts, traffic management, property values, developing South Stage Road as an alternative, and water quality impacts. Public comments were catalogued (FEIS Appendix A) and responded to (FEIS Chapter 7).

CAC Sub-Team Meetings on Pedestrian/Bicycle Safety

A CAC sub-team was organized because of concerns raised by citizens in comments on the DEIS and by the CAC about park, pedestrian, bicycle, and traffic issues. The goal of the sub-team was to explore and produce recommendations on viable ideas that would address these issues, and could be included in the project and forwarded to the FEIS.

Meeting 1. Project staff provided a project update on February 25, 2002, and reviewed the past three years of planning, during which many interchange alternatives were considered. The choice of the Highland Drive Alternative as the locally preferred alternative had been made on January 29, 2002. For purposes of bicycle and pedestrian facilities, the project area was extended north on Highland Drive to Greenwood Street.

The sub-team members worked together to frame the issues. Although the sub-team was allowed to address the entire project area, the clear emphasis was on the area from Highland Drive to Greenwood Street. The following is a list of the issues discussed:

- Impacts to Bear Creek Park
- Impacts to Bear Creek Greenway
- Traffic impact issues
- Signs on I-5 directing traffic to Oregon 99
- Encouragement of public transportation
- Commercial development
- Planning coordination
- Need to provide adequate information to the public
- Impacts on city TSP process
- Environmental concerns
- Ingress/egress to existing parking off Highland Drive
- Pedestrian and bicycle safety
- Existing I-5 ramps
- Beautification issues
- Existing land uses

Approximately 10 members of the public attended the meeting and were invited to comment at the end of the meeting. The recommended solution from the sub-team was approved by majority vote.

Meeting 2. On March 18, 2002, project staff described operations of the new interchange and invited questions. Staff explained that the present interchange, that has free-flow I-5 onramps, makes it difficult for pedestrians and cyclists to cross the ramps. The SPUI would be better because signals would stop all traffic and raised islands would provide refuge, for pedestrians and bicyclists, thus giving them a better chance to safely cross. Refuge islands may be built because of the width of some crossings, such as at Barnett Road. Highland Drive would have bike

lanes on each side of the street. The Barnett Road overcrossing would be restriped to add two bike lanes and a wider sidewalk. Also, the bike lane would extend to Ellendale.

Comments during the group discussion addressed the following topics:

- Planter strips
- Sidewalk and crossing characteristics
- Parking
- Connection in between Greenway and Bear Creek Park
- Stormwater treatment/detention ponds
- Planter strip/landscape buffer along both sides of Highland Drive

There are 17 short-range street projects. The RTP is in the public comment phase. Future needs are to be addressed in the TSP process. This could lead to changes in street standards as well.

The public was invited to comment on the meeting. A member of the public noted the difference between ODOT's 30-year plan and Medford's 20-year plan.

Meeting 3. The purpose of the April 17, 2002, meeting was to work toward and generate a recommendation on pedestrian and bicycle facilities to forward to the CAC and Solution Team.

The project staff presented revised concepts that responded to many of the comments and recommendations generated at the preceding meeting and encouraged a collaborative process with questions throughout. Project staff discussed the next steps, noting the Bear Creek Park Master Plan map by the City of Medford. Project staff explained that ODOT would work with the City and the park plan, take suggestions from this meeting and the previous meeting, and

produce a plan for review at the next sub-team meeting.

Medford Parks Department staff described features of Bear Creek Park and proposed possible improvements. ODOT staff reviewed facilities options outlined in packets received by sub-team members, which were available to the public. The sub-team voted unanimously on an option to forward to the Solution Team and CAC.

Joint Solution Team/Citizens Advisory Committee Meetings

January 29, 2002. The DEIS comment summary and the regulatory compliance summary were presented and discussed. The goal of the meeting was to decide which project alternative should be forwarded to ODOT and FHWA as the Preferred Alternative to be analyzed in the FEIS.

Approximately twelve people from the public commented on the project. About half of the comments were in favor of the project, and about half were against it. Prominent issues that remained included the cost of the project, the continued need for mass transit options, impacts to neighborhoods, and the potential negative impact to businesses in the area.

A discussion was held on the DEIS comment summary. The most common issues in the public comments were suggestions that a third interchange was needed. Members of the Solution Team, the CAC, and the public commented. Issues discussed included limited funding, concern over why the alternative offered by the Eastside Neighborhood Association would not be acceptable, and neighborhood impacts (such as sidewalks and bicycle paths on Highland Drive).

The evaluation criteria and DEIS impact summary were discussed. Issues that arose from this discussion regarded future traffic impacts on Highland Drive and Ellendale Drive, impacts to right-of-way, sound walls, and relocation cost estimates.

After the discussion, the Solution Team and CAC unanimously voted to forward the Highland Alternative as the project's Preferred Alternative.

May 15, 2002. Staff reported that ODOT and FHWA concurred with the recommendation from the Solution Team that the Highland Alternative be advanced to the FEIS as the Preferred Alternative.

The project design items, including changes to the Greenway Trail, changes in roadway alignments, and information from the CAC Sub-Team on Pedestrian and Bicycle Access, were reviewed. After review and discussion of the issues, the Solution Team voted unanimously to recommend the improvements presented by the sub-team.

Barnett Bridge replacement options were also reviewed. A single-span option and a three-span were discussed. The CAC and Solution Team unanimously voted for the single-span option.

September 24, 2002. The meeting covered the project status and included a FEIS update. ODOT discussed project changes to date. The team was briefed on the public involvement activities, aesthetics, and schedule update.

Outreach to Businesses

October 2001. RVCOG staff visited each business in the project area during the weeks of October 15-19 and October 22-26. They described the interchange proposal, the planning process, offered to help business obtain the DEIS or summary, and announced the October 30 public hearing. They gave businesses maps of the Highland Drive and Ellendale Drive Alternatives, copies of the Summer/Fall project newsletter, a letter describing the project and the hearing, and instructions for obtaining additional information.

All owners of commercial land in the project area, totaling 71 owners, were sent an October 16 mailing, which consisted of maps (from the DEIS) of the two build alternatives and a letter that described the following: the project, the October 30 public hearing, and instructions for obtaining additional information.

Other Outreach Activities

October 2001. RVCOG made a project presentation to about 40 administrators of the Medford School District on October 3, 2001, at the school district's administration office. The audience consisted of principals and assistants representing all 18 Medford schools and central office administrators.

Administrators received copies of the Summer/Fall 2001 project newsletter and maps of the two build alternatives.

December 2001. A one-page bulk mailing: "What do you know ..." information sheet was mailed on December 31, 2001, to 13,780 addresses across South Medford (east and west of I-5), highlighting key traffic questions raised by the public. It included a color map, an announcement of

the January 8, 2002, open house, the January 9 "Moving Ahead with ODOT" television show, and sources of additional information.

Additionally, since October 2002, the team has responded to more than seven inquiries with individual stakeholders which resulted in either one-on-one meetings or sending of information.

Newsletter Distribution

September 2001. A total of 2,000 project newsletters were printed for use as public outreach. RVCOG staff distributed 1,650 copies by mail, and copies were also distributed to the following locations:

- Medford City Hall – at counters in Public Works, Planning and Parks departments; tacked to staff bulletin boards.
- Jackson County Courthouse – Board of Commissioners, Courthouse information desk, County Administrator's office, and Planning Department.
- Medford Urban Renewal – handout at office lobby.
- Public libraries – Medford library (reference desk and lobby) and Phoenix library (lobby).
- Chamber of Commerce – Executive Director, lobby, and Visitors Center at South Gateway Center.
- South Gateway Center businesses – Rogue Federal Credit Union, McGrath's Fish House, Fred Meyer, Zack's Deli, Hometown Buffet, Harry & David (for employees), Harbor Freight Tools (for employees), and Valley View Nursery.
- Rogue Valley Medical Center – lobby.
- Rogue Valley Manor – lobby of main building.

- Medford School District –each principal and each school staff room (18 schools), stack of copies for visitors in district office.
- Phoenix City Hall –City Council and Planning Commission members, stacks of copies for main office, planning and building departments.
- RVCOG – front counter.
- ODOT – office lobby, Antelope Road, White City.

The remaining newsletters were distributed at Medford City Council’s October 4 meeting, the DEIS public hearing, and CAC meetings.

As a public outreach update, a July 2002 project newsletter was sent out to approximately 1,500 project stakeholders.

Newspaper

The South Medford Interchange project was featured in the following “Moving Ahead with ODOT” newspaper inserts in the Medford Mail Tribune on the following dates:

June 14, 2002. “South Medford Interchange: Team approves changes”. Story on Solution Team and CAC approval of bicycle/pedestrian CAC Sub-team recommendations.

August 23, 2002. “South Medford Interchange: Protecting and Enhancing the Environment”. Story on multi-agency environmental tour of project site with designers and other project team members.

October 11, 2002. “South Medford Interchange-Digging into the Past to reach the Future”. Story on the archeology study.

November 1, 2002. “Building a Better Bike Path- ODOT Project Team Collaborates on Greenway”. Story on Greenway and Bike Path placement.

Video

During the public meetings held by RVCOG, videos were often shown to explain the need for the project, update viewers on the process, and illustrate how the proposed new interchange would function. The project team produced the following three videos:

- “South Medford Interchange Project: Alternatives and Solutions”. This video presented general background and why the project is needed.
- “South Medford Interchange Alternatives”. This video presented an update on the project and alternatives.
- “South Medford Interchange Simulation 2001”. This video explained how the new interchange would function. It focused on the Highland Alternative.

The South Medford Interchange Simulation 2001 video was shown frequently on “Moving Ahead with ODOT” TV program beginning in the fall of 2001.

Television

October 9, 2002. “Moving Ahead with ODOT” television program: South Medford Interchange with Frank Stevens. The project video, “South Medford Interchange Simulation 2001” was shown.

Agency Meeting

Summer 2002. A multi-agency environmental tour of the project site was attended by designers and other project team

members. Agency representatives provided several recommendations regarding how to minimize and mitigate impacts. For example, they suggested removing as few root wads as possible and instead cutting natural vegetation in ways that would allow regrowth. They also recommended that opportunities to combine mitigation measures with facility features be explored, such as using the water discharged from stormwater treatment detention ponds as the water source for wetland mitigation sites.

