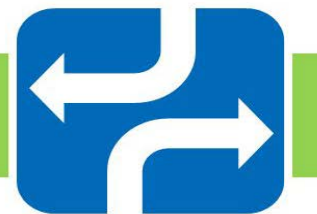


I-90 Interchange Study



I-90 Interchange Study Working Group Meeting No. 2

June 4, 2018 3:00-5:00PM
District 1 Conference Room, Lenox, MA

Summary

Purpose: The second meeting of the I-90 Interchange Study Working Group reviewed progress since the first meeting in February; reviewed the goals and objectives; summarized the Open House participation and comments; presented preliminary traffic and health impact data; and sought consensus from the group on the identification of locations for further screening.

Present: Cassandra Gascon and Ethan Britland of the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) Office of Transportation Planning (OTP); David Derrig, AECOM; Joanne Haracz, McMahon; and Nancy Farrell, Regina Villa Associates (RVA). The following members of the Working Group attended, with members of the public listed at the end of the notes:

Working Group Members

Betsy Andrus, Southern Berkshire Chamber of Commerce
William Elovirta, Selectman, Becket
Jon Gould, Office of Senator Adam Hinds
Peter Frieri, District 1 Alternate
Colleen Henry, Lee Chamber of Commerce
Nathaniel Karns, Berkshire Regional Planning Commission
Clete Kus, Berkshire Regional Planning Commission Alternate
Roy LaMotte, MassDOT Highway Operations
Jeanne LeClair, Economic Development, Hill Towns
Tom Matuczko, Berkshire Regional Planning Commission
Elizabeth Murphy, MassDevelopment
Kate Phelon, Greater Westfield Chamber of Commerce
Rep. Smitty Pignatelli
Derek Poirier, Town of Otis, Highway Superintendent
Brad Curry, Town of Blandford, Highway Superintendent

MassDOT Project Manager Cassandra Gascon opened the meeting and welcomed the attendees. She introduced David Derrig, AECOM's Project Manager, to begin the presentation. Mr. Derrig said he would summarize what the team has accomplished to date and what tasks of the next two months will be shared with the group at the third Working Group meeting in August.

Goals and Objectives

Since the February 2018 Working Group meeting, MassDOT has finalized the Goals & Objectives and the Evaluation Criteria. Mr. Derrig reviewed the Goals & Objectives and referred to a PowerPoint presentation, which is posted on the project website:

- Improve access to and from I-90 for towns in the regional study area
- Mitigate I-90 bound traffic to and from Lee and Westfield

Each goal includes companion objectives such as identifying logical connections between I-90 and local roadways, balancing opportunities and impacts on local communities, minimizing environmental impacts and identifying potential economic benefits associated with improved access to I-90. A successful project will also reduce congestion on local roadways, reduce vehicle miles travelled (VMT) provide alternative routes for commercial vehicles contributing to local roadway congestion, and balancing benefits to Lee and Westfield with potential impacts to adjacent communities.

Mr. Derrig asked if there were any additional goals or revisions. Rep. Smitty Pignatelli said his view is that the project should examine alternatives that make sense and aren't too close to Exit 2 or 3. It doesn't make sense to invest in a new Interchange that is 3 miles from Westfield. It might help that community but defies logic. The best option will balance impacts and benefits across the region as stated in the Goals and Objectives.

Another comment was that Westfield's traffic problems shouldn't become Becket's; and the speaker agreed that the primary goals as stated are good ones. Kate Phelon suggested it would defeat the purpose of the goals not to consider a range of alternatives that have impacts and benefits spread across all communities.

Open House Summary

Turning to the Open House on April 30, 2018 in Blandford, Mr. Derrig said that 166 people signed in but there may have been close to 200 people present throughout the afternoon and evening. There was robust local and regional news coverage as well. Mr. Derrig reviewed the interactive activity, which allowed people to review potential interchange locations and indicate their preferences at a very early stage. This exercise showed that the Blandford Rest Stop received the highest level of interest, with three other alternatives rated about equally: Blandford Maintenance Facility, Algeria Road in Otis, and Route 23 in Russell. Mr. Derrig also shared three slides with comments placed on the flip charts at the Open House or otherwise provided in writing. Mr. Derrig encouraged the Working Group members to review the comments. He said they include support for some options, opposition to any interchange, and a variety of suggestions in between. Some people see the project as a way to address traffic challenges, while others see it as a traffic challenge within itself. He asked the group to review the comments.

Mr. Derrig thought that the exercise for which the team provided scaled templates of potential Interchange layouts helped the participants to visualize the space and design demands of a new interchange. It's not possible just to open the gate at the Blandford Rest Stop and meet safety criteria, for example.

Rep. Pignatelli posed a question about what opponents fear about opening the towns to a new interchange. He and others have heard that those who live in the local towns fear the arrival of stores like Walmart and similar developments. He suggested that there is a role for zoning and planning in shaping or limiting the growth and development of each town. These tools permit communities to preserve or change their character. Jeanne LeClair said she has heard the same concern about big box stores. She suggests that the towns should think of the project as shaping the future, not one that will make immediate changes, and use planning and zoning and the time available now to make important decisions. Mr. Derrig reminded the members that the interchange process would be a lengthy one, and there will be time to plan for the future. Ms. LeClair asked if dissension could shut down the process. Ethan Britland, MassDOT, said that plan is to look at the process as one that results in choosing the best location that reflects benefits and balances impacts across the communities. Rep. Pignatelli recounted how Lenox has changed since the 1950s by using planning and zoning to establish areas for the historic town center, industry and more. When the bypass was proposed, there were concerns and objections, and it has turned out to be a great decision. He suggested that the towns need to start planning to protect what they value and develop plans for a robust future. Clete Kus from the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission said his organization is prepared to assist communities with these efforts.

Mr. Derrig turned to the ongoing work. The consultants are undertaking a travel count program (the information will be ready shortly); travel time analysis; and a public health analysis. They are collecting demographic data from the region and conducting constraints mapping and initial investigations of potential sites. He showed a map indicating where MassDOT's data collection is taking place at the I-90 All Electric Tolling gantries, which offer significant information. The team also has historic data that includes daily and seasonal variations in traffic. Mr. Derrig said there is not a high volume of traffic on local roads now, although residents may feel there is in some places. He showed a graphic of I-90 traffic volumes throughout 2017, with the peak periods in the summer.

The count data will also be used for the operations analysis and to calibrate the statewide travel demand model for development of future traffic projections. This information will also help the team determine where traffic will go on local roads.

A travel time analysis map shows the average daily travel time for road segments in the Study Area. This information will also be fed into the model. Mr. Derrig also showed the information on a spreadsheet.

Joanne Haracz presented information about the public health aspect of the study. She outlined the steps in the screening assessment of communities adjacent to I-90, including factors such as air quality, safety, noise, physical activity and access to green space. The study looks at Public Health Indicators (PHI) such as living alone, days of poor physical or mental health and hospitalization. The data is based on broad geographies of counties of Community Health Network Areas (CHNA).

Ms. Haracz showed a sample I-90 corridor community profile with data on population of those 65 and older living alone and percentage of green space as examples of the work underway. She shared sample data on general health status, asthma rates, asthma Emergency Department visits and pediatric Asthma prevalence. Given some of the data, the team will also look at air quality as a potential influence. Finally, Ms. Haracz showed the percentage of adults overweight, obese or with physical activity for sample communities. All of this information will be analyzed and reported as part of the study.

Mr. Derrig reported that the latest demographic data is being collected as part of an update for the regional Long Range Transportation Plans. This information includes population, workforce, households and employment. The data is used in modeling different alternatives. He showed a series of tables reporting employment sectors in the region; study area wages; and percentages of people employed in different job sectors.

Turning to constraints mapping, Mr. Derrig said the team has a good understanding of every mile of I-90 between exits 2 and 3 and is reviewing terrain, open space, ownership, distance from the exits and other factors that could influence siting an Interchange. He showed high-level data and maps for seven locations. This exercise provides information the team and the communities can use to begin assessing the sites.

Mr. Derrig noted that some members of the Working Group may get a call from FXM Associates, a firm beginning an analysis of the local economy and markets as part of the Study.

Discussion

Ms. Gascon said she hoped to get some ideas from the Working Group about whether these sites look right for further investigation and what issues are of concern.

An audience member asked if MassDOT would upgrade local roads that would be handling more traffic near an Interchange. The team said the planning study will assess local conditions, level of service issues and such factors as bridge weight limits and make recommendations for improvements. Areas immediately adjacent to a new conceptual interchange may require some improvements as a result of a new interchange.

Rep. Pignatelli and others noted that the Algeria Road site might be used by Williams Stone Company, one of the biggest providers of granite in New England. 50-75 trucks a day enter and leave the site and an Interchange at Algeria Road would take some of them off local Becket Streets.

The question was posed if the Interchange could be located in two different places on the eastbound and westbound sides of I-90. Hardy Patel, MassDOT, said the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has specific criteria and prefers all movements to take place in one location. Exits can be within a mile of each other, but not any further. There are ramps in Massachusetts and New England that are grandfathered into the system, but new ramps of this type are not common. There are also a few Interchanges within rest stops (Lexington on 128 is one example), but Mr. Britland said it is a challenge to retrofit a rest stop safely.

There was some speculation about a rail right-of-way that could be extended to serve the quarry; the team said the issue can be referred to in the narrative.

There was also a discussion about the condition of some of the roads in the Hill towns. They are narrow and can be challenging for the large trucks carrying stone or logs to maneuver.

Ms. LeClair said that the group should be looking into the future and not focusing only on today's problems. This study and any subsequent construction would take at least eight years, and the region will have a more diverse economy at that point. A new interchange will help promote the viability of the industries, tourism, sports and communities that are working on development concepts now.

Ms. Gascon asked if the group supports looking at the alternatives that have been presented. Rep. Pignatelli said the Open House confirmed for him that there is no need to build a cloverleaf or trumpet interchange; a diamond will work just fine and will have less of an impact on the environment. He is comfortable with moving ahead with the alternatives analysis as presented, and members of the Working Group generally agreed.

Ms. Gascon said the team needs a bit of time to complete some model testing and anticipates meeting in late August 2018.

There was some discussion of various data, including the fact that the “Hill Towns” are losing population. Blandford and Otis representatives asked if the data will appropriately account for summer traffic that often leaps in a few days from small to much larger numbers. Mr. Derrig said the team is using turnpike data as a surrogate for these seasonal changes. The variation from January to August is 42,000 a month to 67,000, a one-third increase. The team is happy to look at any specific inputs the towns may have. The data includes how many people get on and off at the western exits, but not necessarily where they go from there. Mr. Britland added that the screening analysis and modeling will show these volumes for the planning year of 2040.

There was additional discussion regarding who would use a new interchange, and how to determine if study area residents are using Exits 2 and 3 today. The team may investigate the availability of zip code data or other means of retrieving data from the Turnpike gantry records without compromising user privacy.

Kate Phelon offered to ask Chamber members for data and comments; for example, there are seasonal differences due to Westfield State and other entities. The school alone has 600 employees.

In response to a question, Mr. Britland said it would be very difficult to change the Chapter 90 formula, and it's too soon to be specific about what kind of local improvements might be required.

Ms. Gascon said that the team will continue to aim for a meeting at the end of August 2018 and will try to notice the group 4-6 weeks in advance due to vacation season. She thanked the members for participating and welcomed questions that might arise after the meeting.

Members of the Public Attending –
Eileen Fitzgerald
Derrick Mason
Andrew McCall
Neil Toomey
Kathleen Williams