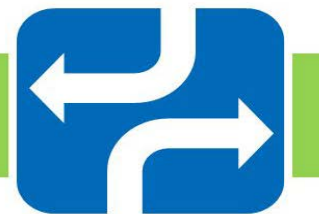


I-90 Interchange Study



I-90 Interchange Study Working Group Meeting No. 1

Blandford Town Hall, Blandford, MA

Summary

Purpose: The first meeting of the I-90 Interchange Study Working Group introduced the study background, purpose, process and framework material, including evaluation criteria and public outreach.

Present: Cassandra Gascon and Ethan Britland of the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) Office of Transportation Planning (OTP); David Derrig, AECOM; 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:

Tim Brennan, Pioneer Valley Planning Commission
 Patricia Carlino, Selectman, Chester
 James Consolati, Selectman, Tyringham
 Adam Dolby, Selectman, Blandford
 Brad Curry, Blandford Highway Superintendent
 William Elovirta, Selectman, Becket
 Alfred Enchill, Office of Senator Adam Hinds
 Peter Frieri, District 1 Alternate
 Matthew Gamelli, Westfield Utility Engineer
 Francisca Heming, MassDOT District 1
 Colleen Henry, Lee Chamber of Commerce
 Nathaniel Karns, Berkshire Regional Planning Commission
 Clete Kus, Berkshire Regional Planning Commission
 Roy LaMotte, MassDOT Highway Operations
 Bao Lang, MassDOT District 2
 Bill Levakis, Selectman, Blandford
 Robert Malnati, Berkshire Regional Transit Authority
 Rich Masse, MassDOT District 2
 Elizabeth Murphy, MassDevelopment
 Kate Phelon, Greater Westfield Chamber of Commerce
 Rep. Smitty Pignatelli
 Derek Poirier, Town of Otis, Highway Superintendent
 Andrew Renfro, Office of Senator Donald Humason
 Gary Roux, Pioneer Valley Planning Commission
 Rene Senecal, Selectman, Chester

Mayor Brian Sullivan, Westfield

MassDOT Project Manager Cassandra Gascon opened the meeting and invited Representative Smitty Pignatelli to welcome the participants. He introduced Westfield Mayor Brian Sullivan and staff for Senators Hinds and Humason. Rep. Pignatelli praised the turnout from the Working Group and the public, which shows the Hilltowns' interest in the proposed project.

The project team used a PowerPoint presentation, which is posted on the project website. Ms. Gascon introduced other team members present, Ethan Britland, MassDOT Office of Transportation Planning; David Derrig, a planner with AECOM; and Nancy Farrell, meeting moderator and public outreach coordinator. The team also includes McMahon Associates, FXM Associates, and Green International Affiliates.

Ms. Gascon said that MassDOT invited a group of regional representatives to participate in the Working Group, including elected officials, planners, chambers of commerce, transportation staff (from the cities and towns and MassDOT Districts), as well as housing and traffic departments. Ms. Farrell outlined the proposed Working Group Groundrules, which were provided to the audience. The goal of the Working Group is to provide local and regional input on the criteria, issues and alternatives and to bring information back to the stakeholders they represent to gather their ideas and comments. MassDOT commits to providing information, data, criteria and considering public comments and suggestions. Consistent participation in the meetings is important, along with respect for other speakers and points of view.

Ms. Gascon invited the Working Group members to introduce themselves with their affiliations.

Background and Purpose

Ms. Gascon offered information on the study background and history. The study originated in MA state legislation, which established the Lee/Westfield Turnpike Interchange Study:

SECTION 139. (a) The Massachusetts Department of Transportation shall conduct a feasibility study relative to the establishment of an interchange on interstate highway route 90 between the existing interchanges located in the city of Westfield and the town of Lee.

The legislation lists elements to be included in the study:

The study shall examine and evaluate the costs and economic opportunities related to establishing the interchange including, but not limited to:

- (i) the projected capital costs;
- (ii) the projected operating costs;
- (iii) the projected use levels;
- (iv) the environmental and community impact estimates;
- (v) the availability of federal, state, local and private sector funding sources; and
- (vi) the resulting economic, social and cultural benefits to the surrounding region and the commonwealth.

Ms. Gascon noted that there was a 2010 Lee Area Traffic Study, which the team might refer to. Its primary focus was on local traffic, with some attention paid to potential interchange locations.

MassDOT Planning Process

Ms. Gascon described the study process. It begins with the planning study, about a year-long effort. If there is a preferred alternative, work will go forward with a design, environmental document, final design and permitting, possibly early action construction and final construction.

The planning process includes the following steps:

- Initiation: Kick-off meeting/study area limits discussion/communications strategy/introductions of Task Force members
- Goals and Objectives: Development of goals and objectives/evaluation criteria/purpose and need statement
- Existing Conditions: Draft and final existing conditions summary
- Alternatives Development: Alternatives development/screening of alternatives
- Alternatives Analysis: Mobility/safety/environmental/socioeconomic/structures/costs
- Report Recommendations: Final report and public meeting

Study Framework

Mr. Derrig described the study area as the corridor of I-90 between Exit 2 in Lee and Exit 3 in Westfield. The regional area incorporates communities whose residents and employees may use a new interchange. The study area extends to approximately a half-mile on either side of the I-90 corridor. This is the area where conditions might be favorable to siting an interchange. Mr. Derrig showed maps of both the local study area and the regional study area. Some of the communities touch the turnpike, while others could be affected by congestion or other effects.

Mr. Derrig listed draft Goals and Objectives for the project:

- Improve access to and from I-90 for towns in the region
- Mitigate I-90-bound traffic to and from Lee and Westfield (locations of the two existing interchanges)

Mr. Derrig listed specific objectives for each goal. To improve access to and from I-90, the objectives include:

- Identify logical connections between I-90 and local roadways
- Identify other communities that would benefit from improved access to I-90
- Balance access opportunities and impacts to local communities
- Minimize environmental impacts
- Identify potential economic benefits associated with improved access to I-90

The interchange may improve access to I-90 for near and more distant communities and help the tax base as well. The process will identify access and opportunities versus impacts.

To mitigate I-90-bound traffic to and from Lee and Westfield, the objectives include:

- Reduce congestion on local roadways connecting I-90 to Lee and Westfield at Exits 2 and 3
- Reduce vehicle-miles traveled (VMT) and vehicle-hours traveled (VHT) on the regional roadway network
- Provide alternative route(s) for commercial vehicles currently adding to local roadway congestion
- Balance benefits to Lee and Westfield with potential impacts to adjacent communities

This analysis looks at the movement of goods and services; truck traffic and movements; the impact of summer traffic; and health benefits that can be achieved through reducing emissions.

Evaluation Criteria

Mr. Derrig said there are evaluation criteria for the analysis and MassDOT will ask for the Working Group's input on applying the criteria. For design and operations of the interchange, the team will look at a variety of interchange configurations; local road connections; any impact on adjacent interchanges; safety improvements; and truck traffic. The study will gather information that will form the basis for applying the criteria; for example, crash rates at intersections will be collected, and vehicles classified that use the local roadways.

Environmental resources will include an assessment of wetlands and other water resources; protected species habitat; steep slopes and local and regional topography; public open space; cultural resources; air quality; and hazardous materials.

Mr. Derrig displayed a typical map with layers of information that could be produced that shows environmental resources by location.

Potential socioeconomic effects include noise; neighborhood impacts; right-of-way impacts; environmental justice; economic benefit; and public health. These issues will include listing sensitive receptors (schools, for example) and assessing improvements for bicyclists and pedestrians.

Financial and regulatory issues will also be analyzed. These will include the construction cost and constructability of the alternatives; need for property takings (or the potential to use public property); the need to upgrade connecting roadways; permits and regulatory filings that could be required; mitigation requirements; and the schedule and potential for phasing.

Outreach Framework

Ms. Farrell said the project's Public Involvement Plan was provided at the sign-in table. The plan details the outreach framework, which includes five Working Group meetings; a project website; an electronic database for emails to the Working Group and interested stakeholders; and two to three public meetings or open houses for the public. The goal of the plan is to provide transparency and make it easy for the Working Group and public to participate in the study and review and comment on the materials and ideas. Meeting summary notes and presentations will be posted on the project website.

Public meetings are tentatively scheduled for April/May; August; and November. MassDOT will circulate media advisories for these public events.

Working Group meetings will be open to the public. The main portion of the meetings will be devoted to a presentation and discussion among the members, with time left at the end of each meeting for public questions and comments. She asked for suggested edits within two weeks, to be sent to Ms. Gascon.

Ms. Farrell asked if the current time and location are appropriate for the members? There was no objection.

Schedule

Ms. Gascon outlined the proposed schedule (which is included in the project presentation). The intent is to complete the draft and final report by the end of 2018. The next steps include finalizing the study area; goals and objectives; evaluation criteria; and public involvement plan. AECOM and other team members will begin an assessment of existing conditions and other data.

Discussion

Rep. Pignatelli asked the team to address the type of interchange ramp to be considered. He mentioned a slip ramp as an option. Mr. Derrig said that the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), which administers highway access, has strict standards and allows for limited exceptions from its requirements. A slip ramp is a short section of road that allows vehicles to enter or exit a controlled-access highway and may not meet the standards. A related question is whether the ramps for eastbound and westbound could be in different locations. Mr. Derrig said typically there are limits and the exits are not very far apart. If the project advances, MassDOT will prepare an Interchange Justification Report with an assessment of benefits, costs and impacts, and a financial plan.

Gary Roux, Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC), suggested there is flexibility within a half-mile buffer if congestion justifies such a plan. The study would have to assess additional locations as well. A representative from the Berkshires asked if the study will include intersection analyses to determine impacts on local roads. Mr. Derrig confirmed the study will be looking at those impacts.

Mayor Sullivan asked about the decision making process. Ethan Britland said MassDOT will look at the recommendations at the end of the study and look into the cost and financial plan. Environmental permitting will be part of the assessment, with the hope that the preferred alternative presents the least impact. If there is a recommended site, the project will move into project development. Funds are programmed at the 75% design phase as part of the Capital planning process.

Bill Levakis, Blandford, asked if MassDOT would prioritize use of public land for the interchange. Mr. Derrig said the team will look at both public and private land initially along the right-of-way, assess the potential sites and which ones might work. MassDOT has a right-of-way group that would be involved and has a process for reviewing and advancing land acquisition.

Tim Brennan, PVPC, asked about the potential for federal funding. Mr. Britland said he doesn't know at this point. While the interstate highway program has been completed, there are potential avenues to explore in the future, along with the state prioritization process.

Mr. Derrig responded to a question about community master plans: the study team will look at them, along with existing zoning.

In response to another question, Mr. Derrig said the team will look at seasonal demand, for example in Lee, and Rep. Pignatelli said there should be toll data from the new AET available from last year.

A member of the audience asked why the project is happening now. Rep. Pignatelli said a new interchange has been the topic of discussion for 16 years. The distance between interchanges is a problem for the communities. The Hill towns have small populations, and they have been shrinking. The lack of easy access to the turnpike affects them, limits commercial development and growth of the tax base. It also puts more traffic on some of the local roads.

Bill Levakis asked if MassDOT would provide compensation to a town where an interchange might be located. He anticipates that there would be more traffic, requiring more police, and development might follow and cause pressure on the tax rate. Mr. Britland said MassDOT would assess some of those issues through planning, but it would not provide funding. A Blandford resident said he would welcome the interchange with the expectation that property values would increase and people would look at the Hill towns for economic development. He noted that the value of his home has decreased over the last few years.

A West Stockbridge resident expressed concern about the half-mile local study area and suggested that towns further away will benefit from an interchange. She said it's a 30-mile trip to the grocery store. She also asked if the impacts would be addressed for more distant communities in the region. Other speakers expressed concern and confusion about the half-mile local study area. Mr. Derrig explained that the half mile is the area immediately adjacent to the interstate where entrance and exit ramps could physically be placed. It is not the limit of the study – additional towns can be added to the regional list, including Sandisfield, and other communities that the Working Group thinks will be impacted. The analysis will extend into the communities in the region. Mr. Derrig explained that the half-mile buffer does not limit the analysis of impacts, but is meant to represent the area within which the likely physical footprint of an interchange would be located.

Another speaker noted that it's difficult for small towns to compete against larger communities for grants and it would be helpful to get some support.

There was a question about how long it might take to complete the study, design and build an interchange. Mr. Britland said a rough estimate is eight years; environmental and design work take 2-3 years, funding has to be advanced, then bidding and construction.

In the past, some safety officials had keys to a gated passage from the Blandford rest stop to enter local roadways. Mr. Britland said that's no longer permitted, not legal and not conceivable for the long term for safety reasons and because it would not be accepted by FHWA. Mr. Derrig said the footprint of the rest stop might be considered as a potential interchange location but it would have to be a full interchange meeting federal standards.

Ms. Farrell invited the audience to review and discuss the maps Mr. Derrig brought covering the study and regional area, among other topics. She thanked the audience for participating and reminded them to look for future emails and project information.

Meeting Attendees

Don Blair
Bob Colelli (sp?)
R. Crozier
Kate Fletcher
Jeanne LeClair
Mary Kronholm
Martin Lynch
J. Martin
Paul Martin
Elizabeth Massa
Hugh McCann
Chris Mikesh
Dan Mikesh
Andy Myers
Andy Montanaro
Cindy Montanaro
Tom Piper
Amy Porter
Jerold Reinford
Pamela Rideout
Tom Shea
Neil Toomey
Robert Twyman