

I-90 Interchange Study



I-90 Interchange Study Working Group Meeting

October 2, 2019 - 3:00-5:00 PM
MassDOT District 1 Conference Room, Lenox, MA

Meeting Summary

Purpose: The fifth meeting of the I-90 Interchange Study Working Group began with a recap of progress to date, then MassDOT provided results of the additional analysis of alternatives and draft study findings. MassDOT suggested that one of three alternatives should not proceed if the study advances. There was an opportunity for public comment.

Present: Cassandra Gascon Bligh and Ethan Britland of the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) Office of Transportation Planning (OTP); David Derrig of AECOM; Frank Mahady of FXM Associates; Joanne Haracz of McMahon Associates; and Nancy Farrell of 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
Peter Frieri, District 1 Alternate
Francesca Hemming, District 1
Clete Kus, Berkshire Regional Planning Commission Alternate
Kate Phelon, Greater Westfield Chamber of Commerce
Hardy Patel, MassDOT
Representative Smitty Pignatelli
Derek Poirier, Town of Otis, Highway Superintendent
Gary Roux, Pioneer Valley Planning Commission
Kathe Warden, Chester Town Administrator

Introduction

MassDOT Project Manager Cassandra Gascon Bligh opened the meeting and welcomed the attendees.¹ She said the team would recap the study progress to date; provide more information on the alternatives analysis; and present the draft study findings. The Working Group members and Study Team introduced themselves.

¹ District 1 staff provided a safety briefing at the opening of the meeting.

Ms. Gascon Bligh asked the attendees to hold their questions until the end of the presentation. Members of the public were invited to ask questions during a comment period at the end of the meeting.

Recap of Progress

Ms. Gascon Bligh used a detailed PowerPoint presentation to share the progress and data. (The presentation is posted on the project website - <https://www.mass.gov/i-90-interchange-study> - and presents more details than are available in this summary.)

The progress recap included information that was previously presented to the Working Group. The primary study goal is to improve access to and from I-90 for towns in the regional study area. The secondary goal is to mitigate I-90 bound traffic to and free Lee and Westfield. The evaluation criteria include design and operations, environmental resources, socioeconomic effects and financial and regulatory factors.

Ms. Gascon Bligh showed a map of the regional study area highlighting the communities and I-90. She summarized the existing conditions such as wetlands and water resources; protected open space; historic and cultural resources; environmental justice; land use; and more (see slide 5). On the next slide, data recapped other existing conditions (slide 6), including public health, the local roadway network, traffic counts, and more.

The Statewide Travel Demand Model (slide 7) predicts daily volumes for the study area towns in 2040 for the No-Build conditions. The slide also presents projected population change from 2020-2040 for the Commonwealth (6.44%) and the surrounding study area counties (0.79% for the Study Area). Projected employment change for the same period is 2.33% for Massachusetts, and -1.17% for the I-90 Study Area. Employment change for the Study Area counties is negative.

Ms. Gascon Bligh summarized the seven alternative sites that were part of the original review and screening. Based on the screening process, three alternatives were chosen for further analysis:

- Alternative 1, Algeria Road, Otis
- Alternative 2, Blandford Maintenance Facility, Blandford
- Alternative 3, Blandford Service Center, Blandford

Maps of the alternatives are on slide 9.

Continuing her recap, Ms. Gascon Bligh listed environmental considerations for the three alternatives. Slide 10 includes a table with the details. Alternative 1 presents steep slopes and open space impacts as well as Environmental Justice impacts.

Conceptual construction costs presented do not include acquiring any necessary right-of-way, environmental permitting or engineering design. The total costs are listed below:

- Alternative 1, Algeria Road: \$37.8 million
- Alternative 2, Blandford Maintenance Facility: \$29.5 million
- Alternative 3, Blandford Service Plaza: \$34.0 million

Estimated daily use predicted for a new Interchange includes (trips per day):

- 5,771 for Alternative 1
- 6,412 for Alternative 2
- 5,922 for Alternative 3

Ms. Gascon Bligh reviewed three maps showing daily traffic diversions for each of the alternatives. Each map shows the increase or decrease in trips per day using color and listing the increases or reductions. Together with the trip diversion table on slide 12, the results show reduced trips per day in the am and pm peak hours as drivers choose more direct routes to their destinations with an additional Interchange.

Additional Alternatives Analysis

Ms. Gascon Bligh presented newer data on several topics that the team researched both as policy and based on requests from the Working Group. The first topic was level of service (which measures the efficiency of peak-hour traffic operating conditions at intersections). Based on density or delay, network operations are assigned a letter value from A to F, based on volume, geometrics, travel speeds, number of lanes and lane changes, and length of acceleration and deceleration lanes. The information was collected for the 2040 No-Build and the Build scenarios.

Ms. Gascon Bligh reviewed LOS for the 2040 No-Build and Build conditions for the am and pm peak hours. Overall, the network would operate at generally acceptable LOS under all conditions. Furthermore, there would be few changes in LOS between future No-Build and Build conditions for any alternatives, with the exception of some individual turning movements at a few intersections. Some turning movements would see a slight increase or decrease in delay, resulting in a change in LOS. One entire intersection would experience a LOS change; North Elm Street (Route 202/Route 10) at Notre Dame Street in Westfield would go from LOS E in future No-Build conditions to D in 2040 Build conditions for Alternatives 2 and 3 (Alternative 1 provides no LOS Change at this location).

Continuing with additional data, Ms. Gascon Bligh said that as they relate to safety, the three interchange concepts meet MassDOT design standards and require no design exceptions. Some of the local street systems would need modifications to accommodate bike and pedestrian facilities as a result of increased traffic volumes. MassDOT does not anticipate that a new interchange would impact existing transit, although it may present an opportunity to provide park and ride lots.

One public health consideration presented was noise. MassDOT used the number of peak hour trips at an interchange within proximity of residences as a conceptual indicator of the anticipated noise impacts of the interchange itself. Alternative 1 has the potential to impact the least number of residences (there are 7 within $\frac{1}{4}$ mile), while Alternative 2 has the potential to impact the highest number of residences (with 18 residents within $\frac{1}{4}$ mile).

Environmental quality is the next public health consideration. Air quality is an indicator of environmental quality, and reduced emissions and increased LOS can positively impact overall air quality within the study area. The table on slide 34 summarizes the average and annual weekday vehicle miles travelled, fuel savings, and greenhouse gas reductions for each alternative. Alternative 3 shows the greatest savings across the board. Looking at Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) and Vehicle Hours Traveled

(VHT) savings, Alternative 3 showed the greatest travel time savings (13.12 minutes per trip), as well as the best mileage savings.

Maps provided in slides 36 and 37 show the potential changes in connectivity and mobility offered by a new interchange. The contours compare how far one could travel in 45 minutes with or without a new interchange. Alternative 2 provides the largest change overall with the furthest reach into NY State and Central Massachusetts. The table on slide 39 summarizes each alternative on a scale of access to opportunities, such as population and household growth, household income, employment and business sales. Ms. Gascon summarized the takeaways from the travel time savings as they would affect people and businesses, including:

- Enhanced prospects of study area residents finding jobs within a reasonable commuting time
- Reduced commute times impacting the amount of time spent in more pleasurable and/or more productive activities
- People can reach more businesses; businesses can reach more customers
- For goods movements, businesses can reduce costs of shipping

Environmental Justice groups are Census Blocks that meet specific criteria regarding income, minority population and language isolation. This process considers the relative distribution of costs and benefits from interchange alternatives as they relate to EJ groups. There should be no disproportionate impact on disadvantaged populations, especially when other alternatives are present. The assessment shows that the Blandford alternatives don't impact the EJ population; however, Alternative 1 in Otis overlaps with an EJ population.

Community impacts include looking at historical, sensitive or recreational resources. Alternative 1 is close to several receptors, including the Girl Scout Camp, Indian Lake and Jacob's Pillow. Since this is a conceptual planning study, no specific impacts were identified, save for proximity.

Ms. Gascon Bligh addressed land use, which is reflected in zoning (see the map on slide 44). The study area is largely identified as residential, so regulation changes or zoning exceptions would be needed for other land uses. She also summarized parcel impacts by alternative. The interchange footprint of Alternative 1 would not affect residential parcels; Alternative 2 would affect 2 residential parcels and Alternative 3 would affect 1 residential parcel.

Slide 46 presents an Alternatives Analysis summary matrix for the additional research and elements.

Draft Study Findings

Ms. Gascon Bligh reiterated the principal task of the study, which is to examine the feasibility of establishing an interchange on interstate highway 90 between the existing exchanges located in Westfield and Lee. She said the team has concluded that the three presented alternatives are feasible from an engineering perspective; however, each would require environmental permitting due to the impacts that have been identified and would require substantial support from local stakeholders to move forward.

Should a project advance, MassDOT looked beyond feasibility to develop recommendations given that there are variations in cost, impacts, benefits and public support and opposition. Of the three alternatives, Alternatives 2 and 3 are more favorable. They are less expensive, present fewer impacts

and offer more benefits. Alternative 1, Algeria Road in Otis, is the most expensive, presents the most complex terrain, offers fewer benefits on a comparative scale, has the highest potential negative impacts, including Open Space/Article 97 impacts, the presence of an Environmental Justice population and has strong public opposition.

To explain how a project might move forward, MassDOT presented potential funding options. These include federal funding, use of toll revenue, and state funding.

Ms. Gascon Bligh detailed the federal funding opportunities, including grants, which would have to meet specific criteria, compete against other projects and be ready to construct. Since this is a conceptual planning study, no interchange alternatives are ready to construct as a result of this study. MPO programming could be considered based on a formula of funds, and the study area regional planning agencies would have to allocate such funds through the Transportation Improvement Programs (TIPs). In this case, the interchange would compete with regional projects and it would also require a substantial portion of available funds. In addition, using federal funds would require bringing the entire Western Turnpike up to federal standards (it was built before the current standards existed).

The team also looked at using Western Turnpike toll revenue. Competition with other projects, and the large proportion of project costs needed for a new interchange comprised the challenges of using this funding source. Funding an interchange with toll revenue generated solely by a new interchange was examined as well. It was found that for all alternatives, the toll revenue would not generate enough money to pay for the new interchange. It could however pay for the operations and maintenance of an interchange.

Additionally, the Commonwealth funds many projects and programs through bond proceeds. As with federal funding, the interchange would compete with projects, both existing and new.

Ms. Gascon Bligh shared a typical schedule of a MassDOT Project Development. From needs identification, through planning, design, programming, procurement and construction can typically be around 12 years. The I-90 Interchange Study comprises only the planning part of this process and stakeholder support and funding would need to be identified to continue with next steps.

Ms. Gascon Bligh said that if an interchange project advances, Alternatives 2 and 3 are more favorable and Alternative 1 should be dismissed from any future consideration.

Ms. Gascon Bligh listed the Next Steps for the study, including posting the meeting materials online; the study Open House, which is scheduled for 10/10 from 6:30-9:00 at Blandford Town Hall. MassDOT will complete a draft report and release it for a 30-day comment period. The availability of the report will be announced through email. After the comment period, MassDOT will finalize the report, publish it online and deliver it to the Massachusetts Legislature.

Discussion

Rep. Pignatelli observed that it made sense to him to eliminate Alternative 1 at the meeting. He suggested that would turn the focus to Blandford, where there are two options. There was general agreement from other Working Group members and the audience. He also noted that the Turnpike is

“free” between exits 4 and 7 and he sees no reason to build a tolling gantry for a new Interchange between exits 2 and 3 and those funds could go toward debt service.

Public Comment

Neil Toomey, Becket, read a statement in opposition to a new Interchange. He suggested that the proposal is “Manifest Destiny” masquerading as infrastructure. He listed other reasons, including shifting truck traffic to local roads; the need to protect resources from degradation; forest fragmentation; the condition of feeder roads; the desire to protect passive and recreational areas.

Jeff from Huntington said there should have been a regional transportation plan symposium to discuss the need for an interchange. He wants to protect aspects of life in the Hilltowns, including their lack of light pollution. He suggested a rotary in Westfield to deal with traffic and taking another look at what’s possible.

A speaker asked for more facts and data and modeling projects. He expressed concern about the unimproved roads in the area. Ms. Gascon Bligh reminded him that the current work is a conceptual study and if the work moves into a project phase, there will be rigorous work to further the design. She said that phase could look further at intersections and local roadways.

Judy Slotnick, Becket, asked how much was spent on the Study? Ms. Gascon Bligh said \$300,000. Ms. Slotnick suggested that was inappropriate.

A speaker suggested looking at the construction numbers and putting the study to bed now. Another speaker said that the proposal would affect all of the Hilltowns, not just Otis.

Rep. Pignatelli shared some history with the group. He said that he has been asked many times throughout the 17 years he has been in the Legislature why drivers can’t exit the Turnpike more efficiently in this area. Every few years, the subject is raised again, and now the study has produced the critically important information necessary to discuss the topic. The region is now much better informed, and other progress is being made on strategies to improve the Hilltowns, on broadband, for instance. He said the study has provided information for people to make an informed decision.

T.J. Cousineau, a Blandford resident and member of the Cemetery Commission, said he is in favor of a new interchange. He noted the length of time it takes to exit and drive through Westfield to reach the Hilltowns. He noted that the Hilltowns are aging, with fewer students graduating from the high school. He said the communities are dying and he wonders who will support the towns and afford to live in them if they cannot access jobs. He said the area needs growing communities and he wants to see a future for the towns.

A speaker said she likes the quiet nights in the Hilltowns and thinks that more people will be telecommuting in the future, so a new interchange is not needed.

Ann Crowley, Becket, said she moved to the region to get away from a community where a federal highway turned a two lane road into a nightmare of cars and trucks.

A speaker thanked Ms. Gascon Bligh for a terrific presentation and asked which of the alternatives is the best option for moving forward. She replied that MassDOT is not specifically recommending that a new interchange project should or should not advance. Rather, it is presenting an analysis of whether a new interchange is feasible, what potential impacts would be, what the favorable alternatives are. The speaker said 50% of homeowners are second homeowners and he is happy to see that Algeria Road is not recommended. He has been a Becket resident for 31 years and doesn’t think a new Interchange is necessary.

Mr. Cousineau repeated his feeling that Blandford and other Hilltowns need a growing community. He shared an example of the Blandford Country Store which has had multiple owners and the Route 8 store in Becket and the failing economy.

Larry Abrams of Becket said he led the opposition to the Algeria Road Interchange. He suggested the presentation offers a false promise of job creation and economic development. The region needs jobs, but this won't do it. Instead, the region should look at high speed rail. And the decision should be made by the community.

An Otis business owner observed that second home owners have driven up property values so the children of long-time residents can't afford to live in their home towns. Jobs are needed.

Bill Elovirta, Chair of the Becket Board of Selectmen, said he was initially for the Interchange and is now uncertain. He is worried, however, that the children of local families can't live in Becket, including his three.

A resident asked why the gates just can't be left open at the Maintenance Facility. Ms. Gascon Bligh said such an entrance/exit would fail to meet Federal Highway requirements.

Kate Phelon asked how the final decision will be made regarding whether a project will advance. She wondered whether there would be a vote or who makes the final determination. There were suggestions for a Town Meeting or a townwide vote. Ms. Gascon Bligh said that there are various ways communities make those types of decisions, but the Towns could discuss the alternatives and the project development process with their regional planning agencies, the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission and the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission.

A speaker noted that large tractor trailer rigs that often get jammed up trying to make turns on the steep roads in the area.

A speaker objected to the use of a ¼ mile factor from a potential Interchange site as an area of impact; she suggested it should be a much wider area.

Another speaker questioned how a decision would be made. Not just Becket or Blandford will be affected, but all of the Hilltowns will. Ms. Gascon Bligh repeated that local support is essential.

There was a general question about agreement to dismiss Algeria Road as an alternative, which was supported by most of the audience.

A speaker stressed the importance of pursuing high speed rail as an option as a better multimodal solution.

Dana Carnegie, representing the Girls Scouts of America, thanked the team for sharing the information about the study and making it easy to access.

PUBLIC ATTENDANCE

Michael Kay, Becket
Wendy Kay, Becket
Janet Stander, Becket
Fran Boonen, Becket

Robert Boonen, Becket
Dana Carnegie, Girls Scouts of Central and Western MA
B. Wacholdy, Becket ILA
Judith Koppel, Becket
Jeff (Illegible), Huntington
Jon Gould, Office of Senator Hinds
Daniel Willman, Otis
Ann (illegible), Becket
Ann Krawet, Becket
Jackie Gentile, East Otis
Ted Cousineau, Blandford
Robert Twyman, Blandford
Lynda Hertzog, Becket
Mark Shapp, Lenox
Carl Goodman, Becket
Jeanette Liemer, Becket
Bea Goodman, Becket
Larry Abrams, Becket
D. Giannini, Becket
Adele Levine, Becket
Lynda Benton, Becket
Matt Gamelli, Westfield Engineering
Elysa Graber, Otis
Dade and Kathi Dickinson, ILA
Judy Keshner, ILA
David Giannini, Becket
Jerry Toomey, Chester
Neal F. Toomey, Becket
Eileen Fitzgerald, Chester
Kathleen and Allen Williams, Chester Granite
Charlie Magovern, Algeria Road
Larry Southard, Otis Selectman
Gerry and Bev Nacheman, Becket
Robert Gross, ILA
Paula Miller, ILA
Chuck Miller, ILA
Barbara Ginsley, Becket
Ted Ginsley, Becket