

**I-91 Interchange 19
Northampton, MA**

**Project Advisory Committee (PAC) Meeting # 4
Monday, May 10, 2010
Bridge Street School Library, Northampton, MA**

Meeting Summary

Attendees:

PAC Members

Ned Huntley – Northampton Department of Public Works
Angela Plassman – Northampton City Council
Jerry Budgar – Ward 3 Neighborhood Association
Frank J. Werbinski – Ward 3 Resident
Christine Cahillane – Ward 3 Resident
Gary Roux – Pioneer Valley Planning Commission (PVPC)
Mary Jane Bacon – Senator Rosenberg’s Office
Dan O’Brien - DCR

Members of the Public

Tom Narrigan – Pioneer Valley Transit Authority (PVTA)
Sydney Stern – Ward 3 Resident
Marianna McKim – Ward 3 Resident
Roy Kimmel
Cynthia Sten
Pat Nowak
John Bobala
Susan Draves – – Massachusetts Department of Transportation, Highway Division,
District 2 (MassDOT)
Karen Axtell - MassDOT

Project Team

Al Stegemann – MassDOT
Bao Lang - MassDOT
Erik Abell – MassDOT
Joe Cahill – TranSystems
Paul Schimek – TranSystems
Gary Bua - TranSystems
Maureen Chlebek – McMahon Associates
Marcy Miller – Fitzgerald & Halliday, Inc. (FHI)

Welcome / Introductions

Erik Abell, of MassDOT, welcomed everyone and thanked them for coming to the meeting. Gary Bua, of TranSystems, reviewed the agenda for the meeting.

Joe Cahill, of TranSystems, began the discussion by going through the evaluation criteria. Items used for evaluation were organized into six categories: traffic, multi-modal, safety, community impacts, environmental impacts, and construction impacts. Each of these categories was comprised of a number of criteria. He described the legend and symbols that the study team used to rank the alternatives.

There was a question about drainage problems near the Norwottuck Rail Trail where the railroad bridge begins. Specifically, what criterion is that classified under? Al Stegemann said that there is an on-going project to repair the drainage, so it is not part of the interchange project. Another person commented that Concept 15 might aggravate this drainage problem because Damon Road would be raised 3-4 feet. Joe said that any design would address drainage to the best practicable extent.

In response to a question, Joe explained that some criteria were ranked qualitatively (on judgment), and some were ranked quantitatively. For example property impacts and travel time are quantitative because a measurement of impacts can be calculated, while aesthetics are a qualitative, or judgment based, assessment.

Joe next discussed the alternatives evaluation. The alternatives include No Build, 10 build alternatives, and one Transportation Demand Management (TDM) alternative. Gary clarified that the 2034 No Build baseline includes the traffic forecasts for 2034, not the current traffic conditions. Joe stressed that the evaluations of the alternatives were made relative to this future year No Build condition.

Concept 12 would convert the intersection of Route 9 and Damon Road into a roundabout. There are improvements in the travel delay, travel time, queuing, crash rates, and traffic calming criteria. Negative impacts occur to emergency vehicles and construction impacts criteria. Frank Werbinski asked about the significance of the emergency vehicle negative impact, and Jerry Budgar asked if it was possible to put a signal on a roundabout for emergency vehicles. Maureen Chlebek stated that roundabouts are not intended to have traffic signals, but that the queues of traffic are smaller than at signalized intersections, so that the effect on emergency vehicles would not be large. There is a small strip taking on one property for this alternative. There are no recreation, agriculture, or environmental impacts. This alternative is considered to have aesthetic benefits. There is a slight negative impact to bicyclist mobility, and a slight benefit for pedestrians, due to the reduced crossing delay compared to a signalized intersection. There was a question about pedestrian safety and how pedestrians cross a roundabout. Maureen stated that pedestrians would operate the same way as they would in an unsignalized crosswalk, except that they need only cross one direction of traffic at a time because of the "splitter island" and that motorists would be moving slowly due to the roundabout's geometry. Transit service would improve due to reduction in east-west intersection delay (as is the case in all the build alternatives). It was asked if construction staging was considered, including the storage of

construction equipment. Joe said that these items were considered under construction impacts.

Concept 13 includes intersection and ramp widening. There are improvements in the traffic delay (though there are still movements that operate at LOS F), travel time, queuing, and crash rates. There is no difference to emergency vehicle access or traffic calming. There are some minor strip takings. There was a question about particular property takings. How wide would they be? For this alternative, the takings would probably be 10 feet wide, and would largely include re-grading the slopes in those areas. There were comments that this was, in fact, a negative agriculture impact. Gary agreed to take a closer look at the agriculture rating for this alternative. There are improvements to bicycle and pedestrian mobility, and no negative environmental impacts.

Concept 13A combines Concept 12 (roundabout) and the portion of Concept 13 that adds a second left-turn lane to enter the I-91 south on-ramp. There are positive impacts to traffic, crash rates, and traffic calming, while there are negative impacts to emergency vehicles. There was a question whether the improvements in this alternative would be constructed all at the same time. Gary answered that construction would likely be sequenced to assure that traffic continues to move as smoothly as possible. Joe stated that, for all the alternatives, the construction timeframes are considered to be optimistic. They do not consider major utility or right-of-way issues that may arise. Thus the estimated construction period can be considered a best-case estimate. This alternative has minor property impacts, though no major community impacts. There is a slight negative impact to bicyclist mobility, and a slight benefit for pedestrian accommodations. There was a question whether the team has studied the effect of how bicyclists fare in roundabouts (regarding safety, delay, or do they try simply find other routes). Paul Schimek, of TranSystems, stated that bicyclists can easily maneuver through one-lane modern roundabouts, but may have more difficulty with two lane roundabouts, which tend to operate at higher speeds. He noted that bicyclists who prefer to ride on the road would use the roundabout, and others would use the Norwottuck Rail Trail. He said the team could provide more information and pictures concerning bicycling through roundabouts. One resident noted that she observes bicyclists going on the north sidewalk when traveling east on Bridge Street. Paul said that providing a sidewalk option for bicyclists is one alternative, but as yet that is not included in the current design, because there is no sidewalk on the south side of Route 9.

Concept 13B includes two roundabouts along Route 9. There are positive impacts to traffic and traffic calming. There are negative effects to emergency vehicles, construction impacts, and community impacts. The roadway itself will need to shift south for the western roundabout (at the I-91 southbound on-ramp). There was a question whether property takings for this alternative would be just re-grading/sloping or would they involve taking a house. Joe answered that this would likely be an easement to adjust the slope, not a complete taking. There was a comment that the team should clarify this before the public meeting, as it would likely be a major concern. It was suggested that the team should have an idea of the degree of slope change as well before the public meeting, especially for the one corner lot most affected by this

alternative. Someone questioned why the entrances to side roads are wider in the drawings. Joe answered that this is because Route 9 would shift south slightly. The turns onto these streets were drawn with standard radii (wider than what exists now). There would be a bit more green space. In addition, there are negative light impacts, largely because of the headlights at second roundabouts. Paul Schimek noted that this alternative has more significant negative impacts for bicyclists, in that it has two two-lane roundabouts, and the more westerly one creates potential conflicts between bicyclists continuing east on Route 9 and motorists exiting to I-91 south.

Concept 13C includes a roundabout and a relocated Damon Road as well as ramp improvements. The traffic effects are the same as those of Concept 13 B. There are negative impacts for construction, recreation, floodplain, and light. Someone questioned why light was listed as a negative impact. Joe answered that residents near the roundabout and ramp might lose a tree buffer, increasing the headlight glare at night.

Concept 15 includes a full access interchange. There are improvements to traffic, including delay, travel time, crash rates, and pedestrian mobility. There is no traffic calming improvement. This alternative is more expensive than the previous ones. There are negative construction impacts, though much of the construction will be offline. There are major impacts to property, community cohesion, agriculture, and aesthetics. There are minor impacts to recreation and bicycle mobility. Dan O'Brien asked if this option includes putting the Rail Trail in a tunnel under Damon Road. Joe answered yes, because the alternative requires that Damon Road be elevated. He noted the positive impact of eliminating a grade crossing. Dan said that the DCR has operational problems with tunnels on existing rail trails, including graffiti and wet and icy conditions due to drainage problems.

There was a question whether this alternative would make it easier to turn on to Bridge Street (Route 9) from side streets, which can be difficult in peak periods currently. There were comments that the additional traffic, including truck traffic, filtered on to Bridge Street in this alternative will create additional problems. It was noted that Bridge Street is a major walkway into town, and would be negatively affected by the added cars and trucks. It was suggested that community impacts have a full red square. There was a question about how many full property takings would be required. Joe answered that four to five properties could require full takings. Joe first suggested that noise should have half red square, though Marianna McKim then suggested it have a full red square. There are negative impacts to wetlands, floodplains, light, and open space in this alternative. It was suggested that floodplain have a full red square as well.

Concept 15A is similar to Concept 15, except the northbound off ramp onto Damon Road would not be constructed. This alternative would provide improvements to all traffic (delay, travel times, and queuing) as well as crash rates. There are major negative impacts to property, agricultures, aesthetics, and community cohesion. It was suggested that community cohesion should have the same ranking as it does in Concept 15. Multimodal criteria scored similarly as in Concept 15, as did environmental criteria. The only difference in environmental rankings is that there would be fewer wetlands affected in Concept 15A. Angela Plassman recommended that floodplains have a full red square for ranking.

Concept 16 includes a flyover from Route 9 westbound to I-91 southbound. There are positive impacts to traffic. This alternative has a very high cost, and there are negative impacts to construction, property, aesthetics, agriculture, recreation, community cohesion, bicyclists, floodplain, and light impacts. Angela Plassman recommended that floodplains and agriculture have a full red square in this alternative as well. Another PAC member suggested that noise and open space should have a half red square.

Concept 17 includes a double flyover. This includes the flyover presented in Concept 16 plus a flyover from Route 9 westbound to I-91 northbound. There are positive traffic impacts. This alternative has a very high cost, and there are negative impacts to construction, property, aesthetics, agriculture, recreation, community cohesion, bicyclists, floodplain, and light. Joe noted that the northbound on ramp has to be very high, possibly 40 feet up. There were comments that noise and open space should both have a half full square, instead of an empty square, for rankings.

Concept 18 includes a compressed diamond. This alternative has negative impacts to traffic, because the spacing between interchanges (under the highway) is not adequate. There are negative impacts to construction and aesthetics. The benefit of this alternative is that it minimizes property and environmental impacts while providing a full interchange. It was suggested to increase the negative noise impacts in the ranking.

Transit and Transportation Demand Management Recommended Concepts

Paul next discussed transit and Transportation Demand Management (TDM) recommended concepts. He stated that the team has discussed options that may be feasible with PVTA and PVPC. He noted that existing congestion, particularly in the afternoon, suggests there is demand to increase the frequency of the Route 9 express and local bus service. The Sheldon Field is rarely even half full, and he did not see an imminent need to expand Park & Rides. The proposed TDM package would include “aggressive” implementation of transit signal priority on all intersections on Route 9 from Routes 5 & 10 in Northampton to University Drive in Amherst. Supporting improvements would include new bus shelters and full implementation of automated vehicle location and passenger counting technologies for passenger information and service planning purposes. The most significant aspect of the package in terms of diverting cars from the study area would be a proposed expansion of the Universal Pass program beyond the Five Colleges. The package would also include signaling the intersection of West Street and Route 9 and restriping Maple Street between the Rail Trail and the malls, both in Hadley, in order to increase connectivity between the trail and popular destinations. In response to a question, Paul stated that the traffic analysis of the TDM package was based on 2034 forecasts.

General Comments and Questions

- There was a question about the goal of project. Specifically, are King Street and Damon Road being looked at? Maureen stated that improving congestion along Route 9 is the main priority of this study. Maureen stated that there will, however, be benefits to Route 5 from a number of these alternatives.

- There was a comment to consider traffic signal synchronization in the project area.
- There were expressions of dislike for Concepts 15, 15A, 16, 17, and 18. Many would like to see them taken off the table now. Some members of the PAC stated that they felt that they are too expensive and have too many negative impacts. They also pointed out that these alternatives do not even have full green circles for improving traffic and that the benefits do not seem to justify the costs.
- Someone asked when the number of alternative concepts will be reduced. Joe stated that this would be after the public meeting in June.
- There were concerns about bringing all concepts to the public. Some believed that this would confuse the public and signify that the PAC is not doing an adequate job. Marcy Miller, of FHI, stated that the June public meeting was only the first of a number of meetings planned and the idea was to bring the public all alternatives for comment, rather than bringing them a decision that has already been made. The goal is to make the process as transparent as possible to the public. The alternatives will be presented in less detail to reduce confusion.
- There was a suggestion to be clearer when presenting to the public: Avoid using directional terms, and instead use such terms as “toward the bridge” or toward “downtown”.
- There was a suggestion to add arrows to the maps.
- There were questions about the general process of the public meeting.
- Concepts 12, 13, 13A have some PAC support. Concept 13B, with two roundabouts, initially did not receive much support. However, one a VISSIM traffic simulation of the alternative was shown, several PAC members did voice their interest in it. In general, there were some concerns about the emergency vehicle impacts. There was a request to give more thought to bicycle access in these alternatives. Finally, there were concerns with property impacts of Concept 13 A.
- There was a request to add a symbol to the price category in the matrix.
- There were questions about the cost of TDM service.
- There were concerns about stormwater drainage. The team explained that stormwater costs are included in the overall construction costs and that since all the designs will meet standards, drainage does not need to be a separate criterion. The team left this as an open issue with PAC.
- There were a number of PAC members who were not at the meeting. Marcy agreed to email the PAC asking those who did not attend for comments on the alternatives.
- There were requests to show the simulations of the roundabouts at the public meeting.

Next PAC Meeting

The next PAC meeting was tentatively scheduled for Tuesday, July 20th at 6 PM. Marcy will check on the school availability and get back to the PAC with location details.