I-5 Marvin Rd to Mounts Rd Corridor Improvements Project - NEPA
Agency Coordination Group Meeting #1 Summary

WSDOT held the first Agency Coordination Group (ACG) meeting for the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) phase of the project on Tuesday, August 6, 2024, from 1-3 p.m.

Meeting agenda
The agenda for the ACG meeting was to:

- Provide a recap of the PEL Study.
- Present an overview of the NEPA process.
- Present initial Build Alternatives.
- Share information about upcoming engagement opportunities

WSDOT study team in attendance: Alex Atchison, Sharese Graham, Aimee Hill, Jenifer Young, Mark Steingrebe, Aleceia Tilley, Kirk Wilcox, Hayley Nolan, Morgan Calder, Whitney White

Meeting opening and goals
The WSDOT study team began the presentation by welcoming everyone and providing Zoom Meeting best practices. The study team led introductions, followed by an overview of the meeting goals and the responsibilities of the advisory groups during the project. The project team shared a project schedule and highlighted advisory group milestones. Zoom Meeting polls and open discussions were used throughout the meeting to gauge understanding and address questions and comments.

Poll question: How familiar are you with the NEPA Environmental Assessment process?

a) Very familiar (10/26 or 38%)
b) Somewhat familiar (15/26 or 58%)
c) Not familiar (5/26 or 5%)
d) Familiar with NEPA but not the EA process (0/26 or 0%)
e) I'm not sure (0/26 or 0%)

The study team shared that the goals of the meeting were to have the ACG actively participate and understand the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) Environmental Assessment (EA) process. The outcomes of the meeting were to gain awareness of the project changes since the completion of the Planning and Environmental Linkages (PEL) Study and to ask the ACG to provide input on the scope of the EA.

The roles and responsibilities of the ACG are to represent agency and resources in the study area, identify any issues of concern regarding the project's environmental or socioeconomic impacts, provide timely input on unresolved issues, and share input on future project permitting requirements.

The study team provided an overview of the NEPA schedule. The NEPA process was initiated in July 2024 and the team expects to publish the EA within a year. The team will have regular touchpoints with the advisory groups and the public throughout the process. The ACG is

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anticipated to meet five times during the study period and can expect regular updates between meetings. The next meeting will be in January 2025 to review the discipline reports.

Recap of the PEL process
The study team presented an overview of the I-5 Marvin Road to Mounts Road PEL Study.

WSDOT and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) conducted the I-5 Marvin Road to Mounts Road PEL Study to identify long-term solutions for I-5 between the Marvin Road and Mounts Road interchanges. The PEL development process built upon existing plans for the corridor and included four concurrence points consistent with FHWA processes. The PEL considered additional technical analyses and community input to arrive at a final purpose and need and recommended alternatives to study in the environmental review phase. Agreement from the Nisqually Tribal Council was given through a signed resolution that supports advancing a single alternative into the NEPA EA.

The Purpose and Need of the project include:

- Enhancing mobility and connectivity on I-5 for passenger vehicles, freight, transit, and active modes and provide support for increased person and freight throughput.
- Improving local and mainline I-5 system resiliency.
- Enabling environmental restoration and ecosystem resiliency at the I-5 crossing of the Nisqually River Delta area.
- Supporting economic vitality through reliable and efficient freight movement and access to major employers.

The PEL then evaluated a set of four alternatives based on the Purpose and Need statement. A shared-use path was a common element to all four alternatives. Four bridge options lengths were evaluated for Alternatives 2 and 3, and three bridge options were evaluated for Alternatives 1 and 4. In the initial Evaluation, Alternative 1 and 4 and bridge Option 4 were determined to be unreasonable and not recommended for advancement to a Detailed Evaluation. Alternative 2, Widen I-5 for HOV lanes, performed the highest in the Detailed Evaluation because it adds capacity for transit vehicles and was more consistent with WSDOT policies and improved multimodal access to opportunities. For this reason, Alternative 2 is moving forward into the NEPA process.

Build Alternative
The study team shared information about the build alternative for NEPA and facilitated Q&A throughout the presentation.

The proposed improvements for the build alternative include:

- Widening I-5 by adding one high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lane in each direction.
- Replacing existing bridges and constructing new bridges across the Nisqually Delta.
- Constructing a new crossing of the BNSF Railway railroad tracks.
- Realigning McAllister Creek.
- Building a shared-use path adjacent to I-5.
- Eliminating two existing fish passage barriers under I-5 in the Red Salmon Creek drainage.
- Installing facilities to treat stormwater runoff from I-5 within the study area.

- Supporting habitat improvements.

WSDOT has continued evaluation of design options for several components of the project since the conclusion of the PEL Study. Based on this continued evaluation, several options have been recommended to not advance into the NEPA phase. Design refinements have been made on bridge length options, shared-use path connections, the McAllister Creek realignment, and the I-5 crossing of the BNSF Railway tracks east of the Nisqually River.

Three bridge length options were evaluated in the Nisqually River delta area. These were identified as Options A, B, and C in the PEL Study. All bridge options included additional bridge length to cross the BNSF Rail track. Each of the bridge length options would have different impacts to the natural environment, as well as impacts during construction:

- Bridge Length Option A (3,000 feet) would replace the existing truss bridges over the Nisqually River and extend east over the north overflow channel.
- Bridge Length Option B (6,000 feet) would also replace the Nisqually River bridges and would fully span the Nisqually River and its overflow channels
- Bridge Length Option C (12,000 feet) would extend the bridge an additional 6,000 feet to the west beyond Option B. This option would also include a new elevated I-5 interchange at Exit 114.

WSDOT is not carrying forward the 3,000-foot Bridge Length (Option A) into the NEPA analysis, since this option would not fully span the Nisqually River's historical channels and would not restore the natural water flow in the delta as much as the 6,000- and 12,000-foot options. It would also be less effective in meeting the project needs of improving I-5 system resiliency and enabling environmental restoration and ecosystem resiliency

A shared-use path was recommended in the PEL Study. The shared-use path would provide a 6.2-mile continuous facility for pedestrians, bicyclists, and other users from the Marvin Road interchange vicinity (Exit 111) to the Center Drive interchange vicinity (Exit 118). The path would be located north of the southbound I-5 travel lanes, would have a minimum width of 14 feet, and would be separated from traffic by a concrete barrier. The PEL considered many different options for the northern shared-use path alignment:

- Option A: Weigh Station Alignment
- Option B: Southbound I-5 Shoulder Alignment
- Option C: Sound Transit Right-of-Way Alignment would continue the path primarily within ST right-of-way, adjacent to the JBLM Eagle's Pride golf course.
- Option D: Golf Course Maintenance Road Alignment
- Option E: DuPont Local Streets Alignment
- Option F: Connection from South Terminus

Options D and E have been dropped from consideration following consultation with the City of DuPont. These options were determined to be too circuitous, to have too much impact on local residential streets, and because they do not provide a direct connection to the city center and park and ride.

Questions and Comments:

– Jeffrey Le Cates, WSDOT: What is Option F?

- Option F includes the path along the majority of the project that connects the south end of the project at the Marvin Road interchange. The other options include the north end connections to existing non-motorized facilities.

The study team continued to share more information on flood modeling results. All build alternatives show good performance with flood reduction. There are minor changes downstream, with few increases in surface water elevation. Upstream shows considerable drops in water surface elevation. Velocity increases are shown in the McAllister Creek channel where there is currently no water flow. Overall, the modeling shows great benefits in flood reduction in a 100-year flood event. The team is currently working on smaller flood event modeling.

The project also proposes realigning McAllister Creek where it crosses below I-5 to improve water quality and habitat. The team is working with the Nisqually Tribe and the Long Live the Kings group to coordinate restoration in the area.

WSDOT studied two options for the I-5 crossing of the BNSF rail line. The existing BNSF bridges over I-5 are not long enough to accommodate the proposed I-5 HOV lanes and the shared-use path. The proposed concept is to build an elevated I-5 bridge in each direction over the BNSF rail line. The bridge structure would be about 1,700 feet long and would slope down to the west to connect with the new 6,000-foot or 12,000-foot bridge. Building a crossing under I-5 has more potential impacts that include:

- Permanent impacts to wetlands and floodplain areas to make room for new stormwater sites.
- Requires building temporary railroad trestles and retaining walls, and temporarily relocates railroad tracks to maintain operations during construction.
- Temporary structures for the railroad detour would require clearing trees and impacting wetlands near the existing track.

Questions and Comments:

– David Troutt, Nisqually Indian Tribe – Will these slides be available after this call?
  - Yes, we will share the slides and post them on the project website.
– Katrina Van Every, Thurston Regional Planning Council – What are you doing to look forward to what we anticipate with climate change, like sea level rise and more frequent and intense storms that may go beyond a 100-year flood event?
  - We are also looking at 2080 projections to account for sea level rise and performing a series of smaller flood event modeling.
– Penny Kelley, Department of Ecology – Railroad ownership seems complicated. Are you working with BNSF to handle design?
  - Yes, WSDOT is coordinating with BNSF. We understand there is a significant level of coordination needed with BNSF to develop the proposed crossing of their railway. BNSF has expressed preference that we build over their tracks.
– Katrina Van Every – Looking at going over the rail crossing, what is the highest point of the bridge over the delta?
  - It would be about 70 feet above the delta level. The highest point is directly over the track. It would all be sloping down from the rail toward the west.

- Penny Kelley – To clarify, are you proposing to build over or under the current BNSF tracks?
    - We are proposing to build over the current BNSF tracks.
- Pat Svoboda, WSDOT – Can you share vicinity locations to the rail line for bridge options over and under structures?
    - We have some working drawings we could share later, but for now it's conceptual.

Overview of NEPA process

The study team shared more about the NEPA process. Coming out of the PEL Study with a recommended alternative and a set of preferred build options, the team must now determine if there are significant impacts to the natural and built environment. If there are significant impacts identified, the process will halt and start a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

The project is currently scoping for an Environmental Assessment. The scoping period, to determine how WSDOT will study environmental disciplines during the EA, is through September 12, 2024.

The environmental disciplines previously identified include:

- Stormwater and water quality
- Wetlands and other waters
- Fish, wildlife and vegetation
- Floodplains and sea level rise
- Geology and soils
- Visual quality
- Air quality, greenhouse gases & energy
- Cultural resources
- Noise
- Hazardous materials
- Land use, Farmlands & Section 6(f)
- Section 4(f)
- Socioeconomic and Environmental Justice

The study team asked the ACG to share input on what is expected to be studied in the EA. They asked for feedback on if study areas were missing, if there are areas of particular concern, and what specific issues should be a study focus.

Questions and Comments:

- Katrina Van Every – Regarding noise, I would like to see some attention given to the experience of pedestrians and bicyclists on the bridge. It would be particularly heavy for those users.

- Penny Kelley – I was curious about the decision to move forward with an EA versus an EIS. As you go through the process of doing an EA, is assessing the significance of identified environmental impacts something you will be asking for feedback on?
    - FHWA is the lead agency for NEPA and makes the ultimate decision on this evaluation. This whole process is based on input from the advisory committees, the public, and subject-matter experts. Having gone through PEL, the existing conditions and initial evaluation gives us a good idea of what we are studying during NEPA. We believe all impacts can be mitigated, which is why we are moving forward through EA phase instead of an EIS. If at some point we find something we can't mitigate, that would trigger an EIS.
- Penny Kelley – Are you talking about compensatory mitigation? There is a whole sequence that must be followed if our review of these reports will be used to make the final decision of EA vs EIS.
- Jeffrey Le Cates, WSDOT – How much time until design items like ITS, maintenance access, and pedestrian safety apparatus are chosen?
    - That will happen once NEPA is complete. We have met with regional traffic and ITS teams to get a list of things they'd like included once we get to that point.
- Robert Phipps, WSDOT – Will you share the results of the public meetings and open houses with us?
    - This group is welcome to join us for the public meetings and to participate in the concurrent online open house. Part of the EA will include a summary of scoping comments. We will share all of that with you and can provide an overview of what we heard at the next meeting.
- Chris Runner, Joint Base Lewis-McChord – When should the Army expect a Cooperating Agency invitation letter?
    - Because we are completing a NEPA EA, the whole process is slightly different than an EIS, and we are not following 23 USC 139. We are following 40 CFR 1501 and are asking all project partners to participate in this process through advisory group meetings, briefings, and individual coordination. We are coordinating this approach with FHWA.
- Katrina Van Every – Will you be considering bridge design options other than using the typical concrete bridge with cylindrical piers? I lived in New Orleans and freeways are all raised on concrete piers and it's a big visual impact that becomes aesthetically more of a positive than a negative if changing design.
    - WSDOT is not yet considering aesthetic design options.
- Penny Kelley – When you say steel girders, you still use concrete, right? My understanding is WSDOT does drilled shafts, and I know the columns that sit on top of the drilled shafts can be done in different shapes, but I think it is all concrete. When you say steel, you're not talking NO concrete, just components are steel, correct?
    - Correct, the drilled shafts will be round and concrete, but they are all underground. Round is the most economic option. Girders are for the span of the bridge itself that can look different depending on how the steel is treated.
- Barney Remington, Federal Transit Authority – With the current project schedule, what are the construction initiation and completion dates expected?

- Construction is not yet funded. We would move into design once NEPA is completed around fall 2026. This will likely be approached as a design-build project, so design would take approximately two years.

– Barney Remington – How involved is Sound Transit so far? I know they are thinking about more rail extensions that should be considered in this design.
    - We know Sound Transit is funded to study for extending the line down in 2045, so we are in communications with them as well as BNSF to ensure we aren't precluding the future rail infrastructure in the area.

Upcoming engagement

The study team shared opportunities for upcoming involvement from advisory groups, subject matter experts and community members.

An online open house will launch on August 13, 2024, and will remain open through September 12, 2024. An in-person open house will be hosted on August 20, 2024, at the Lacey Community Center from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m.

The next ACG meeting will be held in January 2025. For any continued questions, the committee is advised to reach out to Whitney White at whitney.white@wsdot.wa.gov or 360-357-2740.

Next steps
The WSDOT team committed to the following:

- Distribute meeting materials.
- Meet with Executive Advisory Group (EAG).

The meeting adjourned at 2:23 p.m.

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