

## INTRODUCTION

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Potential improvement to U.S. Highway 93 (US 93) have been considered since 1988 when the US 93 Kalispell to Whitefish Environmental Assessment/Finding of No Significant Impact (EA/FONSI) was prepared and approved by the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). There was substantial public controversy generated during the 1989 to 1992 timeframe concerning the improvements to US 93 from Somers through Whitefish. Due to these public concerns that the EA/FONSI did not adequately address the social, economic and environmental effects of rebuilding US 93, in 1992 MDT and FHWA decided to prepare the U.S. Highway 93 Somers to Whitefish West Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The EIS addressed improvements to US 93 from Somers (located south of Kalispell) through the communities of Kalispell and Whitefish to a location about 6 miles west of Whitefish.

During the EIS process, the issues associated with improving US 93 within the community were explored, improvement options and strategies were developed and analyzed, and the impacts of making such improvements were assessed. A Preferred Alternative for improving the facility was identified in the Record of Decision (ROD) for the Final EIS. The ROD was approved by FHWA in late 1994, MDT began work to design and implement the recommended configuration for US 93.

Reconstruction of US 93 at the southern edge of Whitefish was completed in 1998 and design work for the two additional reconstruction projects on US 93 through the Whitefish area – known as Whitefish Urban and Whitefish West – began in early 2005. Although the design of Whitefish West project has proceeded, changing conditions and input received from recent planning studies resulted in MDT initiating a corridor study to determine feasible improvement options using the MDT Corridor Planning Process.

MDT, in cooperation with the City of Whitefish, initiated work on the Whitefish Urban Corridor Study and the Whitefish Transportation Plan in 2007. The Whitefish Urban Corridor Study provides a focused look at the transportation needs and improvement options for US 93 in the Whitefish Urban study area. The Whitefish Transportation Plan, completed in 2010, examines transportation issues in a broader context, evaluates existing and future traffic operations, and identifies long-range transportation system needs for the greater Whitefish community.

## CORRIDOR STUDY AREA

The City of Whitefish, the second largest incorporated area within Flathead County, lies 9 miles northwest of Columbia Falls and 15 miles north of Kalispell. The city is situated in the northern part of Flathead Valley just south of Whitefish Lake. Timber, farming and the railroad have historically provided the economic foundation for Whitefish. In recent years the community has become known as a tourist and recreational destination

due to its proximity to Glacier National Park, the Whitefish Mountain Resort (ski resort), and abundant public lands. These amenities have promoted tourism which has resulted in growth within the community over the last two decades. Whitefish is served by US 93, a major north-south route connecting Canada with the United States, and by Montana Highway 40 which connects with U.S. Highway 2, a major east-west highway located about 7 miles east of the community.

The Whitefish Urban Corridor encompasses a portion of US 93 and adjoining roadways located in the central part of the City of Whitefish. A focus of this study is the section of US 93 from its intersection with 13th Street (Reference Post 126.9) northward along Spokane Avenue to 2nd Street and 2nd Street from Spokane Avenue to just west of Baker Avenue (Reference Post 127.8). This area corresponds to the previously established limits for the Whitefish Urban project – designated as Project Number NH 5-3(80)127, UPN 4781 000 by MDT.

This study area was established to ensure areas beyond the limits of the Whitefish Urban Corridor received consideration. The study area also encompasses the locations where multiple alternatives for the improvement of US 93 were proposed in the U.S. Highway 93 Somers to Whitefish West FEIS/ROD. Specifically, the “Whitefish Area Alternatives” included various roadway configurations incorporating the existing sections of US 93 (Spokane Avenue and 2nd Street), Baker Avenue between 2nd Street and 13th Streets, and existing or new links between Spokane and Baker Avenues.

## PURPOSE OF THE CORRIDOR STUDY

The purpose of this study is to determine short and long-term needs of the Whitefish Urban corridor and to recommend improvement options including the no build. Consideration was given to the needs of non-motorized facility users as well as to vehicular needs. The corridor study relied on a collaborative process involving the City of Whitefish, a Citizens Advisory Committee, MDT, FHWA, other federal and state agencies, and the public to help identify and address transportation problems in the community. The primary goals of the corridor study included:

- 1) Linking land use and transportation planning efforts in the community;
- 2) Fostering interagency coordination;
- 3) Determining issues and environmental factors with the potential to influence the configuration of US 93 through Whitefish; and
- 4) Identifying and recommending appropriate improvements and/or management strategies for meeting existing and future transportation needs.

To accomplish these goals, this study reviews existing conditions, establishes current and future transportation needs within the corridor, identifies an overall vision for improving the corridor, and evaluates alternate ways to address current and future needs. The improvement options and strategies considered for the corridor were evaluated against a set of needs and objectives based on the overall vision for the

corridor. The needs and objectives recognize that the improvements should be are viable to construct, financially feasible, and sensitive to input received from the public and resource agencies. The study will generate products that can be used in future National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)/Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) compliance processes if recommended corridor improvement options are advanced by MDT, FHWA or the City of Whitefish into project development.

## **CORRIDOR STUDY PROCESS**

The corridor study process looks at the existing transportation system within the corridor and how the system could be improved to meet short and long-term needs. The process includes discussion of existing and projected travel patterns and social, environmental, and economic concerns within the corridor. It includes discussion of infrastructure improvements considering the land use and other community changes likely to be seen over the planning horizon.

The study process involved research, data collection, and incorporating public input to identify concerns and environmental conditions relevant to the development of improvement options and strategies for US 93. This information was used to help assess current and future transportation needs in the corridor and develop a set of goals and objectives to serve as an overall framework for evaluating corridor design options and strategies. An important part of this initial information gathering step was the completion of an environmental scan and a meeting with resource agencies to discuss environmental conditions with the potential to affect the improvement options or configuration of US 93 through Whitefish.

A wide range of improvement options and transportation strategies were identified and analyzed to determine their ability to address current and future needs in the corridor. Recommended corridor improvements were identified based on: their ability to meet the transportation functions of US 93 and MDT's current design standards; input received from resource agencies, local planning guidance, and the general public; and funding considerations.

This corridor study was developed concurrently with the Whitefish Transportation Plan. The work completed for the Transportation Plan helped with the analysis of existing conditions and identification of future transportation needs within the US 93 corridor and provided an overall framework for developing corridor recommendations. Similarly, findings and recommendations from the Corridor Study were incorporated into the Whitefish Transportation Plan.

## **LINKING TRANSPORTATION PLANNING AND NEPA/MEPA**

In early 2005, the FHWA issued guidance encouraging stronger linkages between the transportation planning and NEPA processes. The guidance was prepared based on the concern that the environmental analyses produced to satisfy NEPA requirements have

often been disconnected from the products and analyses developed for long range transportation plans, statewide and metropolitan area transportation improvement programs, and planning level corridor or small area plans. Without adequate coordination, the NEPA process may generate information that is more appropriately developed in the planning process, resulting in duplication of work and delays in transportation improvements. Alternately, transportation plans often contain projects that are recommended without due consideration of their potential environmental effects and ability to be realistically funded and implemented.

The overall purposes of the FHWA's 2005 guidance are to help ensure that transportation planning serves as a foundation for making sound decisions regarding highway projects and to better coordinate and manage transportation planning and NEPA processes to make efficient use of limited resources. The implementation of FHWA's guidance is voluntary for states. MDT has chosen to follow the guidance and extend it to its MEPA compliance requirements to help ensure the transportation planning process and the environmental analysis required during project development by NEPA/MEPA work together, with the results of the transportation planning process informing the NEPA/MEPA process.

The requirements for linking transportation planning and NEPA/MEPA were strengthened in 2007 when the FHWA issued regulations implementing changes in the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU). This legislation highlighted several key elements to be included in the planning process to enhance the linkage with NEPA/MEPA including purpose and need; public involvement requirements; the affected environment and environmental mitigation activities; the development, evaluation and elimination of alternatives; consultation with natural resource regulatory agencies; and documentation so planning products can be used in the NEPA/MEPA process. Making these linkages can result in savings in project development and implementation time and costs.

This Corridor Study is considered a pre-NEPA/MEPA document. Rather than formally reopening the US Highway 93 Somers to Whitefish West EIS as it relates to the Whitefish Urban corridor, a pre-NEPA/MEPA study allows MDT more flexibility in examining improvement options for the roadway system. The supporting information, public processes, and recommendations from this Corridor Study and can be directly incorporated and relied upon to streamline future NEPA/MEPA compliance activities for US 93 improvements through Whitefish.

## **PUBLIC AND AGENCY INVOLVEMENT**

The Corridor Study included a variety of activities to involve and solicit input from interested agencies and the public. Since the Transportation Plan and Corridor Study were developed concurrently, many of the public and agency outreach activities for the Transportation Plan were also used as opportunities to convey information and obtain input relevant to the Corridor Study.

A brief summary of some of the project outreach activities utilized during the study's development is provided below:

**Resource Agency Workshop:** A Resource Agency Workshop was held on May 24, 2007 at MDT's Rail, Transit, and Planning Office in Helena. The purposes of this workshop were to: 1) introduce the Consultant Team to agency representatives; 2) provide an overview of the Corridor Study projects; 3) compare and contrast the corridor planning and NEPA/MEPA processes; 4) discuss existing conditions within the US 93 corridor and identify known corridor resource issues and concerns; and 5) solicit input from agency representatives on environmental resources along and affected by the highway corridor through Whitefish and possible regulatory concerns.

**Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) Meetings:** A Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) was established for Whitefish Transportation Plan to act as a sounding board to the Consultant team. The CAC was asked to look at the "bigger picture" regarding comprehensive transportation needs and issues in the Whitefish community. The role of the CAC for this study was to:

- Identify critical issues relating to the transportation system in the Whitefish study area boundary, including the US Highway 93 urban corridor;
- Represent the diverse interests of the Whitefish community;
- Review project deliverables & comment as appropriate. ; and
- Convey other citizen input that may be received to the Consultant team.

The CAC met four times during the development of this Corridor Study – on April 17, 2007, July 16, 2007, January 8, 2008, and August 19, 2008. The final meeting with the CAC focused entirely on the Whitefish Urban Corridor Study was held on April 26, 2010. The CAC was provided with technical materials and draft reports in advance of scheduled meetings.

**Public Information Meetings:** Several public meetings were held during the study process. The first public open house informational meeting for the Transportation Plan and Corridor Study occurred on April 16, 2007 in the Whitefish City Council Chambers. This meeting focused on informing the public about the current transportation problems that had been identified to date, and receiving public comment on which issues should be addressed by the planning studies. A variety of key issues were identified including: 1) the need to plan for future growth; 2) to relieve traffic congestion; 3) to improve traffic safety; and 4) to provide alternatives to the automobile. Specific problem intersections and roadway corridors were identified and presented at this first meeting.

The second public open house informational meeting for the studies was held on July 17, 2007 in the Whitefish City Council Chambers. This meeting occurred after the analysis of the existing transportation system was completed. The effects of population growth and future land use changes on traffic volumes and transportation infrastructure in the community were discussed. Again, the public had the opportunity to provide their

opinions and concerns on transportation system issues in the community and corridor study area.

The third public meeting, focused on the Transportation Plan, was held at the O'Shaughnessy Center on Thursday, January 10, 2008. This meeting gave the public the opportunity to review the draft document in its entirety, including a thorough review of recommended improvement options that not only offered mitigation measures to solve existing transportation issues, but also measures to accommodate future growth issues.

A fourth public information meeting for the Whitefish Transportation Plan and Urban Corridor Study projects was held on August 19, 2008 in the Whitefish City Council Chambers. The meeting was used to: provide an update on the Whitefish Transportation Plan; describe identified corridor problems and needs; present an overall "vision" for the US 93 corridor and outline goals for corridor improvements; discuss preliminary improvement options and other strategies under consideration; and to solicit input from the public on any new ideas (improvement options) for the corridor.

**APPENDIX B** provides summaries of key public and agency meetings held during the development of the Corridor Study.

**Internet Access:** The results of the technical studies and analyses conducted during the study process were made available to the public on MDT's website for review and comment. This enabled the public to stay abreast of the developments occurring during the planning process. It also provided an opportunity for the public to submit comments.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE CORRIDOR STUDY

This Corridor Study has been organized into nine major parts which are summarized below.

- **Part 1.0** examines the existing transportation facilities and services in the corridor study area. The discussion focuses on the existing road and street network and its associated characteristics including the function of the roadways, current traffic volumes, the performance of intersections in the corridor, and the crash history of corridor roadways.
- **Part 2.0** describes existing and planned land uses, applicable land use plans and regulations, and key population and socio-economic characteristics of the Whitefish community. The information describes how the community is likely to grow in the future and how the downtown area of Whitefish may be redeveloped in coming years. The results of an environmental scan identifying potential constraints to the development of corridor improvements are also included.

- **Part 3.0** includes an examination of future traffic conditions and operations on the US 93 corridor. Operational analyses based on the results of travel demand modeling for the year 2030 were used to identify future traffic conditions and potential operational concerns within the corridor.
- **Part 4.0** summarizes the issues and concerns associated with US 93 through Whitefish and presents an overall vision, needs and objectives for corridor improvements.
- **Part 5.0** identifies and discusses configurations and transportation strategies to potentially address immediate and long-term needs within the corridor.
- **Part 6.0** contains an evaluation of the configurations and transportation strategies for the US 93 corridor. The configurations and strategies were initially examined for fatal flaws and to identify those with little or no chance of being implemented. A group of configurations were advanced for more detailed evaluation based on a comprehensive set of screening considerations. Advantages and disadvantages associated with each configuration are presented.
- **Part 7.0** presents a detailed evaluation of the two configurations advanced from previous screening stages. The configurations were evaluated to determine how each addressed detailed criteria associated with the six screening categories.
- **Part 8.0** highlights future improvement options for the corridor.
- **Part 9.0** discusses potential funding sources for improvements to the US 93 corridor through Whitefish and other considerations relevant to the implementation of recommended improvements.

Several appendices with supporting information are also included with this study.