



Technical Advisory Committee Meeting

Harbor Bridge Project Improvements to US 181 at the Harbor Bridge over the Corpus Christi Ship Channel

January 11, 2012 – 2:30 – 4:30 pm
Oveal Williams Activity Center, 1414 Martin Luther King Drive, Corpus Christi, TX

Meeting Summary

Introductions

John Casey, TxDOT Corpus Christi District Engineer welcomed the members of the TAC to the meeting. He introduced himself and invited all committee members to introduce themselves and explain what they hoped to get out of TAC membership. The general sentiment of the group during introductions was the sense of urgency to move forward with the project. Individual TAC members emphasized the importance of the bridge for communities on both its north and south sides, expressed their desire for the Harbor Bridge Project to move forward quickly, and believed that there is some urgency in the need to replace Harbor Bridge. Several individuals indicated their disapproval of the tunnel alternative.

Mission of the Technical Advisory Committee

Nancy Gates, meeting facilitator, reviewed the proposed mission of the TAC.

- To review and monitor environmental studies and engineering products, and provide feedback to TxDOT.
- To promote public awareness and understanding of the project
- To share information learned at TAC meetings with others in their field and to bring back to TAC meetings any feedback received as a result of this information sharing.
- To assist TxDOT in identifying environmental impacts and mitigation strategies for those impacts.

TAC members agreed with this mission.

Harbor Bridge Project History and Current Status

Victor Vourcos, with the TxDOT Corpus Christi District and project manager for the Harbor Bridge Project gave a quick review of the project, which consists of proposed improvements to US 181 at the Harbor Bridge over the Corpus Christi Ship Channel. The project would extend from Beach Ave (at US 181) on the north to Morgan Ave. on SH 286 on the south, so it would include both the bridge itself as well as the associated approaches. The lead federal agency for



the project is the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and TxDOT is co-lead. These two agencies will be working together throughout the project.

Mr. Vourcos explained that TxDOT began the Harbor Bridge Project in 2001 and completed the Feasibility Study in 2003. In 2004, they began their initial environmental process and schematic development (conceptual designs for a bridge replacement), which included TAC meetings. In 2007, FHWA and TxDOT decided to extend the project limits to allow for the future addition of what are called managed (toll) lanes across the bridge and continuing on SH 286. Because of this change in project limits, TxDOT held a new round of scoping meetings that year. In 2007, TxDOT unfortunately had to put the Harbor Bridge on hold because of a lack of funding. Two years later, in 2009, they were able to reinitiate the project. At that time, TxDOT's administration decided that the managed lanes would no longer be included and therefore the project limits could go back to the original project limits as proposed in 2005. In 2010, FHWA determined that the project should be developed using new regulatory procedures that have come into effect since the project first began.

In June and July of 2011, TxDOT published a Notice of Intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). This was the first legal step in beginning the EIS process. Public and agency scoping meetings were held to gather input on the possible project alternatives in August and October 2011.

TAC members asked if the original bridge was built for the current load and about the number of lanes on the original bridge. TxDOT indicated that the bridge was not built for the current load but the bridge has been upgraded. The bridge originally had two lanes in each direction with shoulders on both sides. Once traffic warranted it, the bridge was reconfigured for three lanes in each direction and no shoulders. A TAC member representing the Port of Corpus Christi stated that any new bridge would need to be at least 205 high to allow newer, larger ships to enter the Port.

Review/Group Discussion of Project Need and Purpose

Mr. Vourcos then reviewed the need for the project, which includes safety (e.g., the existing bridge's lack of shoulders, steep vertical slope, challenging roadway approaches); enhanced navigation and economic development of the Port of Corpus Christi (current vertical clearance is a deterrent to larger vessels); increased difficulty in maintaining the structure over the long-term (rising maintenance costs); limited connection to local roadways; and the existing bridge's limited ability to meet future traffic demands. The purpose of the project corresponds to these needs: correcting the sharp curves and steep grades to improve safety, raising the bridge height to improve ship access to the Port of Corpus Christi, maximizing the long-term operation of the Harbor Bridge structure, improving connectivity between the bridge/US 181 and the local roads, and providing adequate capacity on US 181 to meet projected future traffic.

The general public and the cooperating and participating agencies have had an opportunity to comment on this project Need and Purpose, as has the TAC.



Review/Group Discussion of Project Alternatives

Mr. Vourcos explained that there are currently six build alternatives plus the no build (leaving the existing bridge in place) under consideration, as shown on the Harbor Bridge location map that was distributed to each TAC member. These alternatives are the red, orange, green, blue, tunnel, and west alternatives. The tunnel and west alternatives were proposed during the public and agency scoping process in 2011.

Discussion of Alternatives Analysis Process

Matt Thompson gave the group an overview of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the law that governs the way agencies, such as TxDOT, perform EIS's. These studies are required for any major project that uses federal money and could significantly affect the quality of the human environment. NEPA requires agencies to assess the environmental effects of their proposed actions before they make any decisions. The environmental review process includes extensive public involvement.

As Mr. Thompson explained, the EIS process begins with publication of a Notice of Intent, stating the agency's intent to prepare an EIS for a particular project. TxDOT published this Notice of Intent in the summer of 2011 in the *Federal Register* and in the *Corpus-Christi Caller Times*. When the Notice of Intent was published, it provided information on the first public and agency scoping meeting, which took place in August. The scoping process is used to gather input on possible project alternatives, issues, and alternatives, as well as to get feedback on the project Need and Purpose and the project Coordination Plan. A second set of public and agency scoping meetings were held in October 2011 and two new alternatives suggested during the scoping process were identified (the west and tunnel alternatives).

Mr. Thompson explained that TxDOT's analysis of project alternatives will begin with evaluating each alternative to determine whether it meets the project Need and Purpose. To perform this analysis, TxDOT and FHWA have worked together to develop criteria by which each alternative can be measured to determine if it meets each of the elements of the Need and Purpose. These criteria are called the Measures of Effectiveness (MOEs). If an alternative does not meet the Need and Purpose, it will be eliminated from further evaluation. Alternatives that meet the Need and Purpose will be evaluated further during the EIS process. According to NEPA, the EIS must "objectively evaluate all reasonable alternatives, and for alternatives which were eliminated from detailed study, briefly discuss the reasons for their having been eliminated."

TAC members asked many clarification questions related to how they are determined and used during the alternatives analysis process. One TAC member asked if the MOEs include cost and TxDOT responded that cost is not a primary factor at this point in the analysis. Mr. Thompson noted that alternatives can be submitted at any time during the process.



Group Discussion of Public Involvement Activities

Nancy Gates reviewed the planned public involvement activities for the Harbor Bridge Project and explained that public involvement is a key component of the project because public input is needed throughout the environmental documentation and schematic development process.

She noted that TxDOT has already held two public (and agency) scoping meetings (2011), and has considered all input received during those meetings, including suggestions for two additional alternatives to be studied. The project Coordination Plan has also been revised based on comments from agencies and the public.

The TAC and Citizens' Advisory Committee have been formed and are holding their first meetings today (January 11, 2012). TxDOT also is available to meet with small neighborhood groups or organizations as requested. The project website (ccharborbridgeproject.com) is active and being updated as new information becomes available. A project newsletter will be mailed quarterly and also will be available on line.

Ms. Gates then posed the following questions to the TAC:

- How can we do a better job of reaching out to the community?
- Where should we meet with people?
- Are there people that we should contact or events in which we should participate?

TAC members had a number of suggestions in response to these questions. They suggested that the project use the City's public access channel for public outreach, ask other organizations to link to the Harbor Bridge website, and provide printed material at the Oveal Williams Center for people, post notices at schools, and run public service announcements for individuals without web access. Some TAC members also suggested using a utility bill insert to communicate about the Harbor Bridge Project, setting up a table at the Hooks game, and attending Parks and Recreation planning meetings, as well as meeting with employees of local companies on both sides of the bridge. They suggested the Ortiz Center, Solomon Coles School, and Miller High School as possible future public meeting locations. Another TAC member noted that it will be important to communicate consistent messages. TxDOT indicated that they are willing to send a project PowerPoint to any TAC member who would like to use it to make a presentation in the community.

Followup to the TAC Meeting

Future TAC Meeting Times/Locations

Most TAC members seemed to think that meeting at the Oveal Williams Center was convenient for most members because of its proximity to downtown Corpus Christi. They also agreed that a mid-afternoon meeting time is a good idea and recommended not having any future meetings on Mondays. One TAC member asked for a more detailed meeting agenda with specific times for topics.



Public Comments

Timeline

Vicki Crnich (TxDOT, Env)): Asked if the project timeline was linear (or sequential).

Answer: It is sequential. Multiple activities are taking place simultaneously to move the project forward efficiently.

H. Carter: Asked if timeline takes the tunnel option into consideration.

Answer: The schedule does take all the alternatives into consideration but is subject to change depending on the final alternative selected.