

Northwest Corridor EIS Process Conclusion White Paper June 2, 2008

The Northwest Corridor Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was initiated in 2003 with the expectation that funding levels would be able to support major transportation improvements identified in the study. Recently, it has become apparent that transportation needs across the state will be competing for very limited funding. The Transportation Commission has directed all available funds to safety and surface-quality improvements; future capacity needs will be advanced as funding becomes available and local agreement behind such improvements can be attained. Given fiscal realities and lack of local consensus, the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) has decided to remove the Northwest Corridor EIS from the NEPA process, and instead use the data collected to create a transportation planning and environmental study.

FUNDING CLIMATE

CDOT anticipates transportation funding to deteriorate in future years at both the state and federal levels. Without a new, sustainable revenue source, the Department's ability to achieve maintenance goals on existing infrastructure, much less achieve the state's long-term transportation vision, is severely limited. Focusing all funds on the quality of the roadway system will leave little funds for future planning efforts. While the need for a project is an important factor in determining which projects receive funding, those with the greatest public and local-entity support are more likely to receive funding in a fiscally-constrained, long-range plan. Therefore, CDOT has determined that it must take a closer look at its ongoing environmental studies to determine if it makes sense to continue spending money to complete the studies if no future funding stream to implement them can be identified.

One such study is the Northwest Corridor EIS. While CDOT believes that major transportation improvements in the northwest Denver metropolitan area are needed, the Northwest Corridor EIS – like other studies adhering to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) – if completed, has no funding identified to build a preferred alternative in the foreseeable future. Creating a transportation planning and environmental study enables the data to serve as a foundation for future projects, achieving time and cost savings by CDOT that would not otherwise be realized if the NEPA process was completed.

STUDY BACKGROUND

Study of the Northwest Corridor began in October 2003, identifying a need to make transportation improvements in the study area. More than 70 alternatives were analyzed to improve the transportation network from the Northwest Parkway to C-470. During the study, the project team addressed issues such as inter-regional connectivity, community impacts, capacity and mobility concerns, and sensitive environmental areas.

In response to local governments, a Combined Alternative was added to the Draft EIS alternatives in 2006. This alternative was developed in partnership with local government representatives, relying on context sensitive solution principles. It reflected local goals by combining different elements of previously-studied alternatives.

The Combined Alternative would provide a north-south link between freeway systems in the area, making improvements to existing highways in the Interlocken and Golden areas, and add a tolled section in the center portion of the alignment. Capacity improvements in the Interlocken and Golden areas, and a connection from Indiana Street in Golden to McIntyre Street in Arvada also were included. However, stakeholders could not reach consensus on this proposal despite majority-support for this solution.

CDOT attempted to broaden local-entity support for the Combined Alternative by proposing design modifications which might better satisfy the interests of local communities. Discussions between CDOT and the City of Golden concluded in August 2007 due to Golden's dissatisfaction with the proposed changes, which they felt failed to include critical elements of the Golden Transportation Plan, and their fundamental disagreement with the overall project.

NEXT STEPS

The current long-range plan does not include funding for the improvements considered in the Northwest Corridor EIS. It's important to note, that in order to gain a federal approval, or record of decision for the document, project funding must be identified. As such, CDOT determined that it is not the best use of limited public funds to complete the NEPA process for this project. By removing the EIS from the NEPA process, the *Northwest Corridor Transportation and Environmental Planning Study* will define the missing inter-regional connection in the transportation network, assisting with future regional planning.

The *Northwest Corridor Transportation and Environmental Planning Study* will document the results of the detailed analysis collected to date and be available to the public. This document could serve as the transportation vision for the area and basis of future projects by CDOT or other entities. If CDOT were to issue a Draft EIS and Final EIS, it would restrict the ability of these agencies or the private sector to pursue projects in the corridor as it would add federal requirements and justifications based on Section 1506 of the Council Environmental Quality regulations, which limits actions for projects already under study in a NEPA process.

The *Northwest Corridor Transportation and Environmental Planning Study* will include details of the multiple-level screening process, which resulted in four alternatives compared in detail to a no-action alternative, to determine the best transportation solution in the corridor. The study will examine the transportation and environmental data developed in consultation with local governments and agencies, identifying the Combined Alternative as the preferred alternative. Additional information and possible revisions to the alternative based on discussions with the City of Golden also will be included as an addendum to the document.

If any entity or authority, governmental or private, wants to proceed with improvements or connections to state highways in this area in the future, applicable state and federal requirements must be met and established study processes followed to determine feasibility and environmental impacts. While federal funds may not be spent on the project if it has not completed the NEPA process, other sources of funds may still be used. In consultation with CDOT and FHWA, the *Northwest Corridor Transportation and Environmental Planning Study* document could support these efforts to develop future NEPA or technical studies. As part of planning and environmental linkages, elements that could be used to assist decision-making on future projects include purpose and need, alternative development and evaluation, environmental-resource background data, and public and agency coordination.

CONCLUSION

The Northwest Corridor Transportation and Environmental Planning Study is expected to be available to the public in July 2008. The Federal EIS Notice of Intent will be rescinded prior to its release.