

INTRODUCTION

1.1 PROJECT HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

Transportation studies within the Route 82, 85 and 11 corridor area, generally from Colchester to Waterford, date back to the 1950s. Studies that continued over more than a decade led to construction of the first segment of Route 11, from Route 2 in Colchester to Route 82 in Salem, which was completed in 1972. While plans called for extension of Route 11 to the Interstate 95/Interstate 395 (I-95/I-395) area in Waterford, actual construction was deferred, due to funding constraints, in the late 1970s.



ROUTE 11 TERMINATED AT THE ROUTE 82 OVERPASS IN 1972

Routes 82 and 85 (Figures 1-1 and 1-2) are substandard two-lane arterials that experience a considerable amount of traffic traveling between Route 2 in Colchester and I-95/I-395 in Waterford. Traffic volumes are typically heaviest and congestion becomes particularly acute during peak commuter and recreational traffic periods. In an effort to address the existing and anticipated future congestion and safety problems along Routes 82 and 85, transportation planning and environmental studies were reinitiated in 1984. Studies continued through the early 1990s; however, environmental and funding constraints persisted and roadway construction plans were, again, suspended.

Regional growth and development issues affecting the corridor area towns and surrounding communities have focused renewed attention on roadway deficiencies within the corridor. This Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) was initiated to revisit the issues that have frustrated efforts to complete construction of Route 11 for over 25 years. Several potential alternative courses of action are examined, herein, in an effort to identify effective, affordable and environmentally sound strategies to address transportation deficiencies in the corridor.

In the fall of 1997, the Connecticut Department of Transportation (ConnDOT) embarked on a Major Investment Study (MIS) to evaluate corridor conditions and narrow a broad range of potential alternatives, with the intention of later evaluating the “short list” of alternative strategies that appeared most suitable in greater detail through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documentation process [i.e., preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)]. Since most of the information from prior studies dated back to the mid-1980s or earlier, an important aspect of the current studies has been to update traffic, land use and environmental information to reflect current conditions and current regulatory requirements. A traffic data collection program began in January of 1998 and supplemental data were collected in July 1998. Existing traffic information and future traffic projections presented in this document are referenced to these updated 1998 data. Additional traffic analyses were also undertaken in 2000 and 2002.

In late January 1998, the focus of the study was modified to combine both the MIS and EIS processes. In addition, the schedule for completion of the concurrent studies was accelerated. This document reflects the combined efforts associated with both studies condensed into one complete document. The Executive Summary of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) was printed as a separate document for general distribution. Several sections within the DEIS Executive Summary document presented data in summary form only; detailed analyses, methodologies, back-up field data, model outputs, etc. are contained within a series of unpublished technical memoranda and appendices that are available for inspection upon request.

The DEIS was prepared and circulated pursuant to NEPA, codified in 42 USC §4332 (2)c and 49 USC §303, and in accordance with 23 CFR 771, as well as Sections 22a-1a-1 through 12, inclusive, of the Regulations of the State of Connecticut. On February 11, 1999 the document was released for review by federal, state and local agency regulatory officials and other interested parties. Public hearings were held on April 7, 1999 and April 8, 1999 to solicit public and agency comment on the DEIS.

Based on the comments received on the DEIS, public opinion weighed strongly in favor of completion of Route 11 as opposed to upgrading the existing roadway system. However, the DEIS cited a number of natural resource impacts that would result from construction of the new roadway segment. Following publication of the DEIS, additional studies were undertaken to explore opportunities to minimize environmental impacts associated with construction of a new roadway, and to more fully examine the justification for a new roadway, given its likely impact upon natural resources in the corridor area. The end result of the studies and coordination was selection of the alignment variation advanced as the preferred alternative, herein. On September 17, 2001, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) made a determination that either the E₍₄₎m-V3 or E₍₄₎m-V1 alignment variations would satisfy the criteria for the Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternative (LEDPA). On September 19, 2001, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) granted approval for ConnDOT to go forward with the FEIS, advancing the E₍₄₎m-V3 alignment as the preferred alternative. The content and results of the studies, and post-DEIS agency coordination and public outreach, are discussed in Sections 3 and 7.

On August 17, 2004, the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) designated Route 11 as a priority project under President Bush's Executive Order No. 13274. The Executive Order (EO) established an Interagency Transportation Infrastructure Streamlining Task Force in 2002 "to enhance environmental stewardship and streamline the decision-making process in connection with major transportation projects. The EO instructs DOT to select priority projects and establishes an interagency Task Force to coordinate expedited decision-making across the federal agencies." The EO resulted in Task Force oversight of progress on the project.

1.2 FEIS PREPARATION

A fundamental purpose of the NEPA process is to disclose the likely effects of a proposed action to the public and to the agencies having jurisdictional or regulatory oversight, then solicit their input. Comments received following issuance of the DEIS helped to define specific issues that needed to be addressed during subsequent project phases. The purpose of the FEIS is to respond to public and agency comments, and present relevant project design modifications resulting from the post-DEIS review and coordination processes.

This FEIS consists of two volumes and has been prepared in accordance with NEPA. It follows the traditional format specified in the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations and FHWA guidance on preparing NEPA FEIS documents (FHWA, Technical Advisory 6640.8A). The FEIS includes information on changes in the project, impacts, technical analysis and mitigation that has been updated since the DEIS was circulated. All changes and new information are shaded in gray. The FEIS summarizes the additional associated studies that were completed following issuance of the DEIS. The studies are listed in the References section and copies may

be obtained by contacting: Mr. Edgar T. Hurle, Director of Intermodal and Environmental Planning, Connecticut Department of Transportation, 2800 Berlin Turnpike, Newington, CT 06131-7546.

The FEIS identifies the preferred alternative alignment and describes the coordination and public input that resulted in selection of the preferred alternative. Refinement of the initial alignment presented in the DEIS was the result the coordination efforts between state and federal agencies and the towns that would be directly affected by the project.

Issues that surfaced during this collaborative process necessitated shifts in the alignment. Because of this shift, there were isolated areas that needed to be studied in greater detail. Additional community and natural resource features and the extent to which they may be impacted, either positively or negatively, by extension of Route 11 along the selected alignment have been identified. The FEIS includes the updated information and also describes a framework for mitigation to be undertaken to offset identified negative effects.

Volume I of the FEIS contains the main document and Volume II contains appendices and responses to written and oral comments received at the public hearings on the DEIS and during the public comment period. Specific responses are provided, where applicable, or reference is provided to the appropriate section of the FEIS that addresses the comment. Copies of the letters that were received following circulation of the DEIS, along with transcripts of the comments from the public hearings, are provided.

In accordance with FHWA regulations 23 CFR part 771.129(a), a written reevaluation of a DEIS is required if an FEIS is not submitted within three years of the DEIS circulation date. The reevaluation process is to determine whether or not a supplement to the DEIS or a new DEIS is required.

The first required reevaluation was undertaken in November of 2002. A determination was made by the FHWA that the preferred alignment advanced in the FEIS had not fundamentally or substantially changed from that presented in the DEIS. Both the ACOE and FHWA agreed that the alignment variation is not substantial. In addition, there are no environmental factors or features in the project area that have changed, nor have there been changes in laws and regulations that would affect the information presented in the DEIS. It was determined that the information presented in the DEIS remains valid and applicable for use in the FEIS, and that proceeding with the FEIS for this project complies with NEPA, CEQ and FHWA directives.

A new reevaluation was prepared in June of 2006. It incorporated an update of progress on the project, a summary of new information collected since publication of the DEIS, and an evaluation of project impacts. The focus of this reevaluation was information collected during biological surveys performed in 2005 and 2006, after the first reevaluation. The evaluation showed that there were no new environmental factors or features in the project area or in the project concept that changed, nor had there been changes in the laws or regulations that would significantly affect the information presented in the DEIS. It was again concluded that the

information presented in the DEIS remained valid and applicable for use in the FEIS. Neither the conditions of 23 CFR 771.129(a) nor of NEPA regulations 40 CFR 1502.9(c)(1)(i-ii) had been met; therefore, a supplement to the DEIS was not necessary. The 2002 and 2006 reevaluations are provided in the Appendix A in Volume II.