

Columbia River Crossing Feasibility Study

Executive Summary Tier 1 Report



Prepared For



**PARSONS
BRINCKERHOFF**

In Association with
Entranco, Inc
Cogan Owens Cogan
ZGF
Ed Hoyle Consulting
Klein Surveying
Archaeological Investigations Northwest
ECO Northwest

Tier I Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Report Purpose

The SR-35 Columbia River Crossing Feasibility Study is being conducted in response to local business and resident concerns about the safety and viability of the existing Hood River Bridge. The project began in 1999, with the design of a feasibility study to determine if there was a need to replace the bridge and whether there was community support. The community supported a replacement of the bridge, and the feasibility study began in 2000.

The study is organized into three sequential tiers. Tier I of the Study identified the project's issues, purpose and need statement, and a range of crossing corridors and facility alternatives. It determined and initiated the environmental review process, and narrowed the corridors and facility alternatives to those that are most promising and practical. Tier II is intended to select a crossing corridor, focus on the most promising long-term alternatives, select a short-term improvement option, and undertake a financial feasibility study to determine if there are sufficient financial resources available to fund a long-term improvement project. Tier III will conclude the study by selecting a preferred alternative, developing an implementation plan, and completing the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS).

The lead agencies for this study are the Southwest Washington Regional Transportation Council (project sponsor), the Oregon Department of Transportation, and the Washington State Department of Transportation. Parsons Brinckerhoff was retained by the agencies to lead the technical analysis of the project, supported by Entranco (environmental) and Cogan Owens Cogan (public and agency involvement).

This report is a summary of Tier I. It includes a summary of the baseline conditions (existing and 20-year no-build), a review of the project's environmental compliance process, and a corridor screening and evaluation that recommends three corridors (plus the no-action alternative) for further analysis in Tier II. Tier I is scheduled to be completed in the summer of 2001. Tier II is scheduled to be completed by early 2002. Tier III is scheduled to be completed by early 2003.

Overview

Congressional representatives of Washington communities surrounding the Hood River Bridge obtained funding for the Study through the federal transportation funding act known as the "Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) legislation in 1997. In 1999, a project project planning phase was undertaken and a public meeting was held. Major concerns regarding the existing bridge include hazards presented by the narrowness of the travel lanes and lack of bicycle and pedestrian facilities, long-term adequacy of the bridge structure, and impacts to the local economy, especially for

commercial vehicles using the bridge. The project planning phase identified three “tiers” that would be undertaken in the SR-35 Columbia River Crossing Feasibility Study: Tier I, a “feasibility” study to determine if a new crossing was feasible, Tier II, which would identify a practical range of short-term and long-term alternatives, and Tier III, which would select preferred short-term and long-term alternatives. Later RTC, ODOT, and WSDOT decided to add the Draft Environmental Impact Statement to the Tier III process in order to be consistent with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

In October 2000, the feasibility study phase of this project was initiated with a round of public meetings to provide an understanding of the Study and to receive input regarding issues to be studied within the defined crossing areas (“corridors”) and facilities (“alternatives”). Three committees have been formed to advise the project team: a Resource/Regulatory Committee (RRC) comprised of representatives of state and federal agencies who will review environmental analyses, documents, and permit applications pertinent to agency regulations; a Local Advisory Committee (LAC) comprised of area residents and business owners; and a Steering Committee (SC) that includes local elected and appointed officials and agency staff. A project Management Team (MT) comprised of lead staff from the Southwest Washington Regional Transportation Council (RTC), Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT), Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT), and consultant firms meet regularly to oversee the study process.

To date, over 100 people have attended three open houses held on this project, over 70 public and agency comments were received during the scoping period, and over 300 people have returned questionnaires that were distributed early in the study.

There are several significant milestones and decision points during the course of this Study. These include: concurrence on the project’s Purpose and Need Statement and a range of practical alternatives (Tier I); detailed analysis of the practical alternatives and a financial feasibility study (Tier II); and a Draft Environmental Impact Statement and implementation plan (Tier III). The outcome of the SR-35 Columbia River Crossing Study will be the recommendation of a preferred alternative which may consist of improving the existing structure or building a new crossing, and circulation of the DEIS. The Study process is being conducted under requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

The NEPA scoping process, whereby public and agency comments are received regarding issues to be studied, corridors for possible crossings are identified, and a range of alternatives to be considered began in February 2001 with a Notice of Intent (to conduct an EIS) that was published in the Federal Register. The scoping process closed on March 30, 2001.

Analysis

A Baseline Conditions Report was completed in November 2000 and updated in January 2001. This report contained information on existing conditions in several categories, including transportation, economy, recreation, the environment, bridge condition, navigation, and river hydraulics.

The range of comments received during the NEPA scoping period includes: consideration of impacts on windsurfing; motorist, bicycle, and pedestrian safety crossing the Hood River Bridge and at the intersections of the approach road to the bridge; traffic congestion at the tollbooth and along the bridge access road; impacts on the local economy; impacts on the environment, including tribal fishing sites within the study area; and impacts of tolls on the local economy and financing of a new crossing. Other concerns cited were impacts of the alternative crossing corridors on the natural environment, park land, threatened or endangered species, land use (especially the Port of Hood River, downtown Bingen, and the Port of Klickitat), the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, and specific local businesses and recreation areas.

A project Purpose and Need Statement was drafted prior to the scoping period to explain why the project is being undertaken by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) which is the lead federal agency. After the scoping period, the Purpose and Need Statement was refined to reflect comments from the public and resource agencies. The Purpose and Need Statement is based on the project team's investigation of current and long-term conditions of the Hood River Bridge, the transportation needs for a new or improved crossing, and public and agency comments.

Bi-State Environmental Review Process

The existing bridge and any new crossing affects both Oregon and Washington. Both states' environmental regulations and permitting requirements must be met to comply with federal and state environmental and transportation regulations that apply to the construction of a new or improved crossing. Each state has an environmental review process and must comply with agreements between the federal and state agencies charged with regulatory reviews. Therefore, the SR-35 study has begun creating a Bi-State Review Agreement, which would provide a process for one, consistent review and concurrence process between the two states. At this time, each state is updating its individual regulatory review process, and the project team is working with key agency staff to draft an SR-35 Bi-State Review Agreement that would be consistent with the new processes in each state.

Corridor Evaluation and Recommendations

The project team conducted an initial corridor screening in May 2001. Screening criteria were developed in accordance with technical expertise, the Purpose and Need Statement and public and agency comments. Baseline information available on a corridor level was used as the basis for this screening, and corridors were screened for their potential to have high, moderate, or low impacts associated with each criterion. The results are presented in the Recommendations chapter of the Tier I report.

The result of the evaluation and public process is to recommend that the following corridors be carried forward:

- City Center
- Existing Low

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- East A
 - No Action

Additionally, the following facility types are recommended for analysis in Tier II:

- Short Term Improvements to the Existing Bridge
- Tunnel (various types) at the City Center Corridor
- Floating or movable bridge
- Fixed span bridge.

Next Steps

TIER II

Tier II would begin in the summer of 2001. It would involve selecting a crossing corridor, refining information to assist in the evaluation of alternatives, beginning the selection and preliminary evaluation of alternatives, and narrowing the choices to only the most promising and feasible long-term alternatives. Also included would be a financial feasibility study to estimate costs associated with implementing alternatives and to determine if sufficient funding resources are available to support a long-term improvement.

Additionally, short-term solutions would be analyzed and a preferred short-term solution selected.

TIER III

Tier III, if conducted, would begin in the spring of 2002 and would include selection of a preferred long-term alternative, completion of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement, and preparation of a financial and implementation plan.

Figure 1. Map of Crossing Study Corridors



