

VI. PROJECT COORDINATION

A letter notifying Involved and Interested Agencies that the NYS Thruway Authority desired to serve as Lead Agency for the project, in accordance with the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA), and Part 1 of the Environmental Assessment Form (EAF) were sent on November 1, 2004. Confirmation of consent by these agencies was received by the Authority by December 15, 2004. A Positive Declaration notifying involved and interested agencies of the Authority's intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement for the proposed project was prepared and sent on January 28, 2005. Parts 1, 2, and 3 of the EAF were also sent to involved and interested agencies on January 28, 2005.

A public scoping meeting was held on February 15, 2005 at Saint Sophia Greek Orthodox Church in the City of Albany. The meeting was advertised via flyers to public officials in the City of Albany and Towns of Guilderland and Bethlehem and advertisements in the Times Union and the Delmar and Guilderland Spotlights. Copies of the Draft Scope were made available to the public at local libraries in Albany, Guilderland and Bethlehem. The public was invited to comment on the purpose and need for the reconstruction and mobility improvement, the types of alternatives to be considered, and to provide input on the issues and concerns that should be addressed in the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The Final Scope for the Draft Environmental Impact Statement and response to comments received at the public scoping meeting were distributed on May 10, 2005. A copy of comments received from the Town of Bethlehem, Town of Guilderland, and Albany Pine Bush Preserve Commission, responses to those comments, and comments received at the public scoping meeting are included in this chapter.

Requests for information on the presence of endangered or threatened species were sent to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Division of Fish, Wildlife & Marine Resources (New York National Heritage Program). Letters from these agencies in response to the request are included at the end of this chapter.

Also included in this chapter is a letter of No Effect from the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) in response to their review of the Cultural Resources Overview Survey and Phase 1B Archeological Reconnaissance Survey. Copies of these reports are included in separately bound Appendices G and H.

February 15, 2005 Public Scoping Meeting – Response to Comments

Comment: Evaluate the effect of constructing a third lane on the Thruway will have on nearby State and local roadways.

Response: Projected traffic volumes for the design year have been developed and trip diversions have been calculated by the Capital District Transportation Committee (CDTC) to account for traffic pattern changes due to regional growth and construction of the project. The Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will consider mitigation measures as necessary for these changes; however, output from the CDTC STEP Model indicates that there will be no significant change to the traffic patterns due to the project.

Comment: Evaluate trip origin-destinations within the Albany corridor.

Response: The CDTC STEP Model, used to forecast traffic volumes and patterns, incorporates trip origin-destination data throughout the Capital District. Therefore, an origin-destination study is not needed for this specific project and will not be included in the EIS.

Comment: Traffic should be diverted to other highways during construction, not local city streets.

Response: No off-site detours will be used during reconstruction of the mainline pavement. In order to keep two lanes opened daily, a temporary or permanent third lane and transitions to shift traffic around construction areas will be used while each lane is reconstructed. Construction impacts will be evaluated as part of the EIS.

Comment: The Thruway Authority should work with the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) to alleviate congestion in the Capital District, not just on the Thruway mainline.

Response: NYSDOT is on the Project Advisory Committee (PAC) for the Albany Corridor Study, through which this project was identified, and as such has been provided with information regarding the study and this project. The Thruway Authority typically involves NYSDOT in its studies and projects when appropriate. In addition, the Thruway Authority participates as a voting member of the CDTC which is responsible for transportation planning in the Capital District.

Comment: Address current, future, and construction drainage runoff deficiencies in the project area.

Response: Existing drainage deficiencies will be evaluated in the EIS. Measures to address stormwater runoff for the completed project and stormwater runoff during construction will be evaluated in accordance with the State Pollution Discharge Elimination System (SPDES) permit. The SPDES permit provides minimum criteria for reducing the quantity of stormwater runoff and minimizing erosion and sediment impacts from construction activities involving soil disturbance.

Comment: Investigate alternative modes of transportation along the Thruway, such as park-and-ride lots and expansion of bus routes between Albany and the surrounding suburbs, and alternative layouts, not just adding lanes and increasing vehicular traffic.

Response: Alternative modes and layouts will be evaluated in the EIS as stated in the Draft Scope under Reasonable Alternatives To Be Considered. Additionally, Transportation Systems Management (TSM) strategies, such as intelligent transportation systems like variable message signs, and Travel Demand Management (TDM) strategies, such as encouraging car pooling, expansion of bus routes, and construction of park-and-ride lots, will be evaluated. The use of alternative layouts, such as managed lanes and managed service, and the no-action alternative will also be evaluated as alternatives to the construction of a third lane in the EIS.

Comment: Weigh benefits of constructing third lane against the impacts to neighborhoods adjacent to the Thruway.

Response: Impacts associated with all feasible alternatives will be evaluated in the EIS.

Comment: Consider constructing third lane on western side of southbound lanes to keep new lanes as far as possible from developments on eastern side of Thruway.

Response: Alternative locations for a potential third lane will be evaluated as part of the EIS.

Comment: Evaluate changes in the quality of life associated with noise, mitigate impacts by constructing noise walls, and use landscaping to improve the appearance of noise walls.

Response: A noise analysis will be completed as part of the EIS. The use of noise walls will be evaluated in accordance with the NYS Noise Analysis Policy and included in the design at locations where their placement is considered reasonable and feasible. Landscaping will be included as a mitigation measure to replace vegetation that is removed and for visual impacts created by the proposed project where feasible; however, planting of trees has minimal effect in reducing traffic noise.

Comment: Reduce the Thruway speed limit back to 55 mph to alleviate noise impacts.

Response: A 10 mph change to the posted speed limit would not result in a large enough decrease in noise levels to mitigate noise impacts.

Comment: Mail copy of the noise assessment study to the Public Meeting attendees.

Response: Copies of the EIS, including the noise analysis, will be available for public review at local libraries. Individual copies of the final noise analysis report or the entire EIS will be distributed, upon request, for a nominal fee to cover reproduction expenses.

Comment: Evaluate increases in air pollution during and after construction.

Response: An air quality screening will be completed for the EIS to determine whether an air quality analysis is required. In addition, CDTC will conduct an air quality conformity analysis for the EIS to ensure that emission levels in the Capital District remain less than the National Ambient Air Quality Standards set forth in the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990. Air quality issues during construction will be evaluated by identifying factors that could potentially affect air quality. Mitigation measures will be considered for impacts resulting from the proposed project.

Comment: Evaluate changes in quality of life associated with dust, brake dust, vehicle fumes, and maintenance activities for properties bordering the Thruway.

Response: Impacts resulting from this project associated with dust and vehicle fumes will be evaluated in the air quality analyses. The EIS will also evaluate these changes for temporary impacts during construction.

Comment: Provide a buffer between the Thruway mainline and the new Kelton Court school.

Response: The plans for the school provided to the Authority included a vegetative buffer. However, noise, visual, and air quality impacts will be evaluated in the EIS for the Kelton Court school and other properties adjacent to the project area.

Comment: Please explain why the Draft Scope states that “no impacts to... (school districts, recreation areas, places of religious worship and businesses) are anticipated” and no senior housing facilities have been identified when these types of facilities exist adjacent to the Thruway right-of-way within the project area.

Response: Impacts to general social groups, school districts, recreation areas, places of religious worship and businesses within the project area refers only to facilities that are affected by right-of-way acquisitions or changes in travel patterns. These types of facilities will be identified, and noise and air quality impacts to these properties resulting from the proposed project will be identified separately in the EIS.

Comment: Evaluate and minimize impacts to the Albany Pine Bush Preserve and the Albany Pine Bush ecosystem.

Response: The Thruway Authority will work with the Albany Pine Bush Preserve Commission to identify and minimize impacts to the Albany Pine Bush ecosystem within and adjacent to the project area. Albany Pine Bush ecosystem impacts will be identified in the EIS.

Comment: Do not remove the natural buffer, in the form of mature trees, and include new landscaping as part of the project to block light from construction activities and night traffic.

Response: Removal of mature vegetation may be required as part of the project in order to improve safety. When feasible, trees will be replaced and landscaping will be considered to mitigate the disturbance. Visual impacts to surrounding properties will also be considered. Mitigation measures, such as landscaping, will be evaluated in the EIS, and evaluation of increases in headlight visibility has been added to the EIS Scope in the Visual Resources section.

Comment: Address vibration impacts which are physically damaging structures near the Thruway mainline.

Response: The potential for increased vibration at properties adjacent to the Thruway will be evaluated in the EIS by comparing changes in the distance between the pavement and existing structures and increases in traffic volume. A section has been added to the EIS Scope to discuss changes in vibration as a result of the proposed project.

Comment: Evaluate effect of the project on the interchanges and proposed interchange concepts included in the Albany Corridor Study.

Response: Traffic growth and changes in travel patterns have been modeled by CDTC to account for changes due to regional growth and project construction. Based on CDTC's modeling, no significant traffic changes are expected to occur as a result of this project. The proposed project will be designed so that it does not preclude construction of any of the Interchange Concepts included in the Albany Corridor Study. In addition, this project was found to have independent utility from other capacity improvements on the mainline and at interchanges.

Comment: Address congestion on Interchange ramps and at the toll plazas.

Response: The proposed project was initiated to address pavement deficiencies between Interchanges 23 and 24. Addressing congestion on the interchange ramps and at the toll plazas is beyond the scope of this project and will not be included in the EIS.

Comment: Modify the existing tolling structure at the interchanges to reduce congestion on the interchange ramps and at the toll plazas.

Response: This project does not include any work at the interchange ramps or toll plazas and as such, changes in the existing tolling procedures will not be included in the EIS. However, the Thruway Authority is conducting a separate study to evaluate the current tolling system and investigating the feasibility of alternative methods to collect tolls along the entire Thruway corridor. The results of this study will be reflected in any future interchange improvements or construction of mainline barriers.

Comment: Construct a new Interchange at Route 85 (Interchange 23A).

Response: The proposed project was initiated to address pavement deficiencies and mobility needs between Interchanges 23 and 24. Construction of a new interchange at Route 85 is beyond the scope of this project and will not be considered in the EIS.

Comment: Do not construct the Flyover at Interchange 24.

Response: This project does not include any work at the Interchange ramps or toll plazas and as such, improvements associated with Interchange 24 will not be included in the EIS.

Comment: Address traffic operations for side streets along Route 9W near Interchange 23.

Response: The proposed project was initiated to address pavement deficiencies between Interchanges 23 and 24. Improvements along Route 9W are not within the jurisdiction of the Thruway Authority and will not be included in the EIS.

Comment: Do not preclude future construction of a bicycle trail along Thruway right-of-way and re-establish pedestrian and bicycle connections across the Thruway.

Response: The EIS will focus on the current project, reconstruction of the mainline pavement between Interchanges 23 and 24, and the impacts associated with the project. If there were a formally programmed regional project that included construction of a bicycle and walking path on Thruway right-of-way, the Thruway Authority would cooperate to the best of its ability with implementation of such plans where feasible. However, priority for using available land will be given for safety improvements and construction necessary to complete the Interchange 23 to 24 Reconstruction project over other potential future uses. This project will not further bisect any communities, and no work on bridges that connect neighborhoods on either side of the Thruway will be included as part of this project. Future bridge work would evaluate improved pedestrian and bicycle accommodations in cases where the municipality has plans for pedestrian and bicycle accommodations on the approaches to the bridge. No changes have been made to the EIS Scope for this project to include pedestrian and bicycle accommodations.

Comment: *If the additional lane is placed on the current shoulder, the distance between the Thruway and properties adjacent to the Thruway will decrease.*

Response: Alternative layouts will be evaluated in the EIS as stated in the EIS Scope under Reasonable Alternatives To Be Considered. Alternative layouts, such as a High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lane, will be evaluated along with the no-action alternative in the EIS. It is anticipated that if an additional lane is constructed, it will primarily be located within the existing median. However, there are areas that will require widening to the outside of the existing lanes. Mitigation measures will be considered for impacts resulting from the proposed project.

Comment: *Why are overpass clearances being increased? Is consideration being given to allow higher and larger commercial vehicles on the Thruway?*

Response: Overpass clearances will be increased, where possible, to meet current State and Federal design standards. There are no plans to allow larger vehicles to use the Thruway.

Comment: *Consider how and where the existing pavement will be disposed.*

Response: Most of the existing pavement will likely be disposed of off site; however, some may be used to flatten slopes along the Thruway within the project limits. Disposal of the existing pavement is at the discretion of the contractor in accordance with standard specifications for construction work on the Thruway. Specific specifications for disposal will not be addressed in the EIS.

Comment: *Address drainage concerns related to the McKownville Reservoir located near Stuyvesant Plaza.*

Response: Improvements associated with the McKownville Reservoir and the drainage system along Western Avenue are not within the Thruway Authority's jurisdiction and will not be included in the EIS.

Comment: *Separate signs on Northway at Exit 1 to clarify each lane choice: Western Avenue / Route 20; I-90E Albany/Boston; I-90 Buffalo / I-87 NY City.*

Response: Improvements on the Northway are not within the jurisdiction of the Thruway Authority and will not be included in the EIS. The Thruway Authority will share comments related to this topic with the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT).

Comment: *Construct new highway connecting the Thruway at Interchange 25A or 26 to the Northway near Exit 16 as a means to reduce traffic at Interchange 24.*

Response: Improvements outside of the project area between Interchange 23 and 24 are beyond the scope of this project and will not be included in the EIS. The Thruway Authority will share comments related to this topic with the CDTC, which is responsible for regional planning in the Capital District.

Comment: *Construct third lane between Interchanges 16 and 17.*

Response: Constructing a third lane between Interchanges 16 and 17 is beyond the scope of this project and will not be included in the EIS.

Comment: *Add tolls to I-84.*

Response: The proposed project will not evaluate existing conditions, including tolls, along I-84. Improvements outside of the project area between Interchanges 23 and 24 are beyond the scope of this project and will not be included in the EIS.

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VII. LIST OF PREPARERS

The Final Environmental Impact Statement was prepared for the New York State Thruway Authority by:

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VIII. LIST OF AGENCIES, ORGANIZATIONS, AND PERSONS TO WHOM COPIES OF THE STATEMENT ARE SENT

The following agencies were sent a copy of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). For those agencies which commented on the DEIS, the date and page where the comment can be found are listed in parentheses next to the agency name.

Federal Agencies

- Federal Highway Administration
- US Department of Interior, Division of Ecological Services, Fish & Wildlife Service
- US Department of Interior, Water Resources Division, Geological Survey
- US Environmental Protection Agency, Region 2
- National Center for Environmental Health, Center for Disease Control & Prevention
- Department of Housing & Urban Development
- Advisory Council on Historic Preservation
- US Department of Agriculture
- Federal Aviation Administration, Eastern Region
- Federal Railroad Administration
- US Army Corps of Engineers, New York District
- National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (02/23/05 & 04/06/06, p.)
- National Marine Fisheries Service, Northeastern Region
- Federal Emergency Management Agency, Region 2

New York State Agencies

- NYS Department of Transportation, Region 1
- NYS Department of Environmental Conservation
- NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, Natural Heritage Program
- NYS Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation
- Department of Agriculture & Markets
- NYS Police
- NYS Department of Health
- Empire State Development

Local Agencies

- City of Albany
- Town of Bethlehem (03/30/06, p.)
- Town of Guilderland
- Albany County (03/08/06, 03/13/06, & 03/17/06, p.)
- Capital District Transportation Committee (03/27/06, p.)
- Albany Pine Bush Preserve Commission (03/29/06, p.)

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