

4.0 CORRIDOR ISSUES, VISION, AND GOALS

This portion of the study describes issues associated with the US 93 corridor through Whitefish that have been identified through previous planning efforts within the community. These issues are indicative of the reasons why improvements are needed within the corridor. An overall vision and a set of goals were drafted to help identify and evaluate infrastructure improvement options for the corridor based on the identified needs. The corridor vision and goals are examined for consistency with the purpose and need for improving the US 93 corridor developed for the U.S. Highway 93 Somers-Whitefish West Final EIS.

4.1 Identification of Corridor Issues

Input on issues associated with the reconstruction of US 93 through Whitefish and general transportation concerns have been received from agencies and the public through a variety of past projects and plans conducted in the community. These include:

- U.S. Highway 93 Somers-Whitefish West Final EIS/ROD (1993/1995)
- MDT Whitefish Urban and Whitefish West Design Projects (2005/Ongoing)
- Whitefish Downtown Business District Master Plan (2005/2006)
- Whitefish City-County Growth Policy (2006/2007)
- Whitefish Transportation Plan (2010)

While each of these projects and plans have a specific focus, the public input, analyses, and recommendations generated during these planning efforts collectively provide an extensive amount of information directly relevant to this study. The Corridor Study acknowledges these past projects and plans to use them to help identify appropriate and effective improvements for the corridor.

The issues and comments identified through previous projects and community planning efforts were reviewed by the consultant team. Since many of the issues and comments are closely related, they were combined to generate a set of statements reflecting corridor needs that can be used to develop an overall vision and goals for the corridor. The issue statements below were presented to the public and to the Citizens Advisory Committee during the development of this study.

Traffic Operations

Traffic circulation problems and congestion exists along US 93 through downtown Whitefish. The lack of appropriate dedicated turn lanes on 2nd Street at the intersections Spokane and Baker Avenue is a key factor contributing to congestion. The lack of east-west and north-south road connections within the community affects the efficiency of the local transportation system.

*Trucks in Downtown
Whitefish*

Truck traffic on US 93 (including construction vehicles serving new developments) is a concern in Whitefish and affects safety, environment, and downtown image. The design for US 93 should attempt to mitigate that traffic through the community to the extent practicable. However, US 93 is part of the National Highway System and trucks cannot be prevented from using this public facility.

Safety

Existing street configurations and development patterns, high traffic volumes, and driveway accesses along the US 93 corridor contribute to safety concerns for motorists, pedestrians and bicyclists.

Parking

Improvements to US 93 could impact the availability of on-street parking.

*Potential
Environmental Effects*

The community values the environment and recognizes it is one of the factors that helps make Whitefish unique. Corridor improvements have the potential to affect the natural environment, most notably at highway crossings of the Whitefish River. Improving US 93 also has the potential to affect historic properties, a potential historic residential district, and involve sites with hazardous materials concerns.

Land Use/Growth

The Whitefish area has grown at a rapid pace in recent years resulting in changes to existing and planned land uses in the community. Transportation improvements must be adaptable and flexible to accommodate future growth in the Whitefish area and consider recommendations from local plans.

Community Character

Preserving the character and “small town feel” is essential to Whitefish’s economic vitality and quality of life. Landscaping and streetscape enhancements are desirable elements of corridor improvements.

*Alternate
Transportation*

Pedestrian and bicycle facilities are an essential and desirable element of the local transportation system. The community has expressed an interest in expanded transit opportunities and services in Whitefish.

4.2 Corridor Needs

The comments received and relevant technical analyses from past projects in Whitefish were reviewed to help establish the “needs” to be addressed by improving the US 93 corridor. These corridor needs are summarized on the following pages.

4.2.1 Improve Traffic Congestion and Capacity Concerns

There is a need to address existing and projected peak period traffic congestion resulting from inadequate highway capacity and/or operational problems at key intersections like 2nd Street and Baker Avenue. One of the principal reasons for considering improvement options to US 93 through Whitefish is to provide for and maintain the efficient movement of traffic. To accomplish this, the facility must be designed to handle existing and future traffic at an acceptable Level of Service (LOS). MDT’s operating standards identify LOS C as acceptable and LOS B as a desirable service level. As noted earlier, LOS D and E suggest deteriorating operating conditions and increased delays. LOS F represents conditions where lengthy vehicle delays and congestion occur.

Traffic congestion is often seen in Whitefish during morning and evening peak hours, specifically at several major intersections on Spokane Avenue, 2nd Street, and Baker Avenue and adjoining side streets. Analyses performed for the Whitefish Transportation Plan and this study indicated the following:

- Currently, one or more approaches at the signalized intersections of Spokane Avenue and 13th Street, Spokane Avenue and 2nd Street, and 2nd Street and Baker Avenue operate at LOS D, E or F during the AM and/or PM peak hours. Overall, the intersections of Spokane Avenue and 2nd Street and 2nd Street and Baker Avenue operate at LOS F and E, respectively, during the PM peak hour.
- By the year 2030, the signalized intersections at Spokane Avenue and 13th and at 2nd Street and Baker Avenue may operate at LOS E or F, respectively, during the peak hour.
- While traffic flows on Spokane and Baker Avenues operate acceptably, the high volumes of two-way traffic on these routes make left turns or through movements from these side streets difficult during peak hours.
- The LOS analyses based on the results of the travel demand model, suggest unsignalized intersections along Spokane and Baker Avenues between 13th Street and 2nd Street would function at an undesirable LOS by the year 2030. As noted previously, while the mainline roadways may function acceptably, the overall LOS ratings for the unsignalized intersections are reduced because of the vehicle delays experienced on side street approaches.

- Without improvements, the majority of Spokane Avenue between 13th Street and 2nd Street, 2nd Street west of Baker Avenue, and most of Baker Avenue south of the Whitefish River would approach or exceed their capacities by 2030.

Future improvement options to US 93 need to provide for improved traffic flow in anticipation of future community growth. The Whitefish Transportation Plan recognizes the road and street network in Whitefish lacks continuous parallel collectors and streets that provide east-west connectivity across the City. As a result, motorists have few options other than using US 93 for travel through the community and congestion often occurs during peak hours.

4.2.2 Improve Geometric or Roadway Design

Lane widths, shoulders, and parking areas along Spokane Avenue and 2nd Street are generally adequate and comply with the geometric design criteria for urban principal arterials identified in MDT's Road Design Manual. However, portions of the facility have poor lane continuity, some intersections lack beneficial turn lanes or cannot adequately accommodate all truck movements, and some turn lanes have insufficient capacity. Addressing these needs can relieve traffic congestion and better manage traffic flows through Whitefish.

4.2.3 Improve Safety

As noted earlier in this study, almost 87% of the reported crashes on Spokane Avenue and 2nd Street during the three-year study period were attributed to intersections along the corridor. Three intersections had more than 10 recorded crashes during the study period—Spokane Avenue and 13th Street (17 crashes), Spokane Avenue and 2nd Street (11 crashes), and 2nd Street and Baker Avenue (14 crashes).

All but 10 of the reported crashes along Spokane Avenue and 2nd Street during the study period involved two or more vehicles with the most common crashes being rear-end collisions, right-turn/angle collisions, sideswipe collisions and left turn collisions (8%). The overall safety performance of the corridor should improve if the future design addresses the causes of traffic congestion along the corridor.

The U.S. Highway 93 Somers-Whitefish West FEIS suggests a high number of driveway access points exist along Highway 93 corridor in Whitefish. Although this portion of the corridor does not include a high concentration of driveway approaches, such access points often contribute to conflicts between through and turning traffic. Future improvements to Spokane Avenue and 2nd Street should identify opportunities to combine or restructure approaches to minimize traffic conflicts and enhance safety where practicable.

4.2.4 Improve Traffic Flow for Trucks

There is a need to improve the flow of large trucks passing through Whitefish on the US

93 corridor. Large commercial vehicles on US 93 adversely affect traffic operations, contribute to congestion along 2nd Street, present safety concerns, and are inconsistent with community desires for the downtown expressed in local plans. Truck traffic is comprised both of large commercial vehicles (tractor-trailer combinations including chip and log trucks) passing through the community and smaller commercial vehicles serving businesses and new construction in the Whitefish area.

Past input from the US Highway 93 Citizens Working Group (CWG) suggests design improvements for the corridor should attempt to redirect or reduce truck traffic through downtown Whitefish to the extent practicable. However, since US 93 is on the National Highway System, trucks cannot be prevented from using this public roadway.

4.2.5 Improve the Physical Condition of US 93 through Whitefish

Much of US 93 in the corridor was constructed in 1939, and received an overlay with seal and cover in 1979. Pavement maintenance and other activities are routinely completed by MDT to preserve the facility.

While the existing highway has been well maintained, most of Spokane Avenue and 2nd Street within the corridor are nearly 50 years old and key infrastructure components need upgrading. For example, the traffic signals along 2nd Street cannot provide for varied phasing/timing schemes and protected left turns at appropriate locations.

4.2.6 Develop Fundable and Implementable Improvement Options

As managers of public funds, both the MDT and the FHWA have the obligation to build and maintain facilities in a financially prudent manner. That is, the dollars expended to both maintain existing facilities and build new ones should accomplish the states' transportation goals in a cost-effective manner.

The recommended improvement options should be realistically implemented corridor improvements. This means projects should be practical, generally fit within available right-of-way and meet environmental regulations. Improvements should meet MDT Standards, Policies and Procedures. Improvement options would also need to be conducive to staged construction (to meet available transportation funds) and be able to address the short-term needs as well as long-term needs of the corridor. Staged construction could minimize disruptions and street closures to traffic.

Local funding may be needed to implement corridor improvements. Considering the type of improvements and design recommendations presented in local plans, it should be recognized local funding contributions may be required to help pay for the proposed improvements within the corridor.

In January 2008, the FHWA issued guidance regarding planning and environmental document approvals given the current fiscal realities of funding for transportation

improvements. The FHWA's guidance clarifies the statutory and regulatory planning and (air quality) conformity requirements must be met for a proposed project prior to FHWA issuing its environmental approval for the project. This has relevance to the Whitefish Urban corridor since improvements to US 93 were previously identified through an EIS process. Improvement options recommended as a result of the corridor study must be evaluated and approved through a future National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) process (such as a Reevaluation of the Final EIS or a Supplemental EIS for the Whitefish Urban project area).

The FHWA's guidance indicates before FHWA can issue an environmental approval for a regionally significant project, the proposed project or project phase (e.g., preliminary engineering, final design, right-of-way, utility relocation, or construction) must come from an approved, (financially constrained Statewide Transportation Improvement Program(STIP)).

Regionally significant projects include projects on a facility which serves regional transportation needs and typically includes principal arterial highways like US 93. The FHWA provided guidance to MDT on July 17, 2008 to help identify the characteristics of regionally significant projects. In Montana's rural areas, outside of Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) planning boundaries, regionally significant projects include all projects on principal arterial highways that add potential capacity or significantly change the highway's operational characteristics. The guidance indicates the most common types of highway improvements (such as projects involving pavement preservation, minor/major rehabilitation, reconstruction on or paralleling the existing alignment without adding lanes, safety improvements, and new or revised intersection control or configuration) are not regionally significant. A copy of FHWA's July 17, 2008 guidance letter to MDT can be found in **APPENDIX C**.

The term **financially constrained** means that projects can be implemented with current or proposed revenue sources without affecting the operation and maintenance of the transportation system as a whole. Montana, along with other states, must develop a STIP showing priority transportation projects to be undertaken during the period covered by the STIP (at least 3 years). FHWA's July 17, 2008 guidance to MDT outlines requirements for developing funding plans, agency approvals for final NEPA decision documents, and procedures for including regionally significant and non-regionally significant projects on the STIP.

Whitefish is considered to be a Rural/non-MPO Area, so FHWA and MDT will need to review the scope of any proposed changes to US 93 and determine if the proposed improvements meet the regionally significant definition. The FHWA fiscal restraint guidance means that MDT must ensure that future improvements to the corridor are duly considered in the STIP and that adequate and viable revenue sources are available to implement the recommended improvement options or individual phases of such a project. Given the current funding situation for transportation improvements in Montana, it is unlikely all funding needed to implement recommended improvement

options will be available at the conclusion of a future NEPA/MEPA process. For this reason, a logical phased approach to implementing recommended improvement options will likely be necessary. Logical improvement options phasing, if appropriate, will need to be identified.

4.2.7 Avoid or Minimize Adverse Environmental Effects

Recent Whitefish planning efforts and associated citizen input indicate broad community support for environmental protection and the recognition that natural resources comprise one of the community's greatest assets. The City's Growth Policy advocates protecting natural areas and traditional neighborhoods and avoiding development that is out of scale with its surroundings as ways to help preserve "community character."

As noted in **Part 2.0**, future reconstruction of US 93 could require encroachments on or crossings of the Whitefish River and could impact associated wetlands. Improvements within the existing US 93 corridor could also affect historic properties in some neighborhoods adjacent to the highway.

With this in mind, future improvement options to US 93 need to be designed in a manner sensitive to adjoining lands and attempt to avoid or minimize adverse effects on environmental features important within the community. Compliance with relevant federal, state, and local regulations will ensure projects are developed with adequate environmental protection measures.

4.2.8 Consider Local Plans

Current land uses and future development within the corridor are guided by the Whitefish City-County Growth Policy and recommendations from the Whitefish Downtown Business District Master Plan. These documents have been adopted by the City of Whitefish and lay out a desired framework for how the community should develop and how the downtown core may be revitalized.

Coordination with the City will be needed during the development of future improvement options for the corridor to consider local recommendations and determine how they can be addressed without adversely affecting the future operation of US 93 and funding availability.

4.2.9 Enhance Pedestrian and Bicyclist Facilities Along US 93

Bicycle and pedestrian safety, mobility, and accessibility need to be maintained or improved as part of the surface improvements to US 93 through Whitefish. According to the City's Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan, Spokane Avenue and 2nd Street are designated as a proposed bike route with links to other designated bike routes and pedestrian paths. Other designated pedestrian or bicyclist trails cross or parallel US 93 within the City.

If improvement options to US 93 are forwarded into project development, the project development staff should correlate with the city on connections with the city’s planned trial network.

4.2.10 Consider Transit and Intermodal Transportation

Public transit services in Whitefish are currently limited and operate on a seasonal basis. However, public input received during the Whitefish Transportation Plan suggests a strong local desire to begin thinking about providing transit services and facilities suited to the unique needs of the community. Some comments recognized the benefits for area residents and visitors provided by a transit system makes intermodal connections with AMTRAK passenger rail facilities in Whitefish and commercial air service at Glacier Park International Airport.

Future improvements to the US 93 corridor should not preclude the provision of transit service or development of transit-related facilities in the community.

4.3 Corridor “Needs” Versus FEIS “Purpose and Need”

The corridor “needs” discussed earlier are important considerations for the future NEPA and MEPA process that must be undertaken by MDT and FHWA if improvement options are forwarded into project development. The identified corridor needs are directly relevant to the purpose and need discussions found in environmental decision documents like the U.S. Highway 93 Somers-Whitefish West FEIS.

The purpose and need section is one of the most important parts of such documents because it establishes why the agency is proposing to invest public funds while at the same time causing environmental impacts. The project purpose and need drives the process for alternatives development, in-depth analysis, and selection of the most appropriate action. The alternatives considered in the U.S. Highway 93 Somers-Whitefish West FEIS/ROD were developed based on the following purpose and need statement (found on page 1-4 in the FEIS):

The primary purpose and need for improvements to US 93 is to reduce congestion on the existing facility, provide for planned growth and development, improve safety, provide for improved intermodal facility connections and provide for enhanced scenic values.

The purpose and need statement above reflects the overall project goals and objectives listed on pages 2-4 and 2-5 in the FEIS. The FEIS suggested that meeting the project goals and objectives for improvements to US 93 would result in the following secondary benefits:

- Providing support to Flathead County economic development;
- Enhancing and supporting Flathead Valley visual quality;

- Accommodating travel demands associated with population and employment growth;
- Providing support to modal relationships (including pedestrian and bicycle circulation); and
- Correcting US 93 deficiencies.

Since the time of the FEIS/ROD, several local land use planning efforts have been completed that have identified local desires to enhance downtown Whitefish, preserve the unique character of the community, and protect environmental features. However, the same fundamental needs identified in the FEIS—reduce congestion on US 93, improve safety, accommodate planned growth and development, improve intermodal connections, and provide visual enhancements—still exist within the Whitefish Urban corridor. For this reason, the original FEIS purpose and need statement still remains valid for the corridor.

4.4 Corridor Vision

Establishing a vision and set of goals for the corridor can guide the development improvement options. The vision is a statement of the desired future for the corridor – from both a land use and a transportation perspective. The goals support the vision, and lay out desired long-range outcomes to be achieved through the corridor planning process. The vision and goals help define effective improvements and strategies for the corridor.

Developing a vision for the Whitefish Urban corridor involved several steps, including a thorough review of the issues and public comments received during previous projects and community planning efforts. Additionally, system evaluations and operational reviews, travel demand modeling, and public input received as part of the Whitefish Transportation Plan helped identify future transportation needs for the corridor.

Based on this input, the following vision statement for the Whitefish Urban corridor was drafted:

“The US 93 Whitefish Urban corridor serves as an important regional and local transportation link and helps support the economic, social, and recreational structure of the community. Future development of US 93 through the Whitefish urban area should effectively serve personal travel and goods movement within and through the corridor and provide safe transportation facilities for residents, community visitors, and through travelers.”

Transportation improvements should support community land use visions and plans, be adaptable to accommodate future growth, and help maintain or enhance Whitefish’s unique character and quality of life. Transportation improvements should resolve site-specific operational or safety problems along the corridor and be designed and implemented in a way that protects the natural environment.”



This vision statement was reviewed by MDT and the City of Whitefish and presented to the Citizens Advisory Committee and the public during meetings for the corridor study.

A set of goals and associated objectives were developed based on the vision for the US 93 corridor. The goals and objectives were also important considerations during the evaluation of improvement options and strategies for the corridor. The goals and objectives can be found in **APPENDIX D**.