WORKING DRAFT

Whitefish Urban Corridor Study of US Highway 93
Technical Memorandum – Task 20

Corridor Issues, Corridor Vision and Goals, and Statement of Purpose and Need

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TECHNICAL MEMORANDUM – TASK 20
Corridor Issues, Corridor Vision and Goals, and Statement of Purpose and Need

This Technical Memorandum highlights issues associated with the US Highway 93 corridor through Whitefish and outlines an overall vision and study goals to help identify and evaluate infrastructure improvement options for the corridor. The corridor vision and goals are reiterated in a statement of purpose and need for corridor improvements.

IDENTIFICATION OF CORRIDOR ISSUES/CONCERNS

Comments on issues associated with the reconstruction of US 93 through Whitefish and general community transportation concerns have been received from interested agencies and the public through a variety of past projects and planning processes undertaken since 1993. These projects and planning processes include:

- U.S. Highway 93 Somers-Whitefish Final EIS/ROD (1993-1995)
- Whitefish-Urban and Whitefish-West Citizen's Working Group (2005)
- Whitefish Downtown Business District Master Plan (2005/2006)
- 2007 Whitefish City-County Growth Policy (2006/2007)
- Whitefish Transportation Plan (2007/2008)

Issues relevant to the US 93 corridor in Whitefish that were identified during each of these planning efforts are discussed on the following pages.

Issues/Concerns Identified in the FEIS/ROD

In 1993, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) began work on the U.S. Highway 93 Somers-Whitefish EIS. A wide range of issues concerning US Highway 93 reconstruction through Whitefish were identified through public involvement activities and technical analyses completed during the development of the Final EIS (FEIS) and subsequent Record of Decision (ROD).

The U.S. Highway 93 Somers-Whitefish FEIS addressed highway reconstruction on US Highway 93 between Somers (located south of Kalispell at Milepost 104.3) and Milepost 133 (located west of Whitefish). The EIS evaluated existing transportation and environmental conditions and identified issues relevant to highway reconstruction within the project study area. The FEIS identified the following issues or concerns on portions of Spokane Avenue/2nd Street and Baker Avenue where a one-way couplet was chosen as the Preferred Alternative in 1995.

Traffic Operations

- High rates of traffic growth (30-90 percent increases in volumes) and inadequate roadway and intersection capacity were issues identified on US 93 in the Whitefish area. Key intersections need to be adequately designed for large vehicles and heavy traffic volumes.

- The Whitefish area experiences substantial seasonal variation in traffic volumes with traffic volumes dramatically higher in the June-August period.
- The US 93 corridor through Whitefish was identified as a primary route used by logging and chip trucks, and other large commercial transporters with such vehicles accounting for 8-13% of traffic in the corridor.
- Several highway bypass options were considered but dropped from consideration because the traffic modeling showed such options would not divert sufficient traffic volumes off US 93 to justify their cost. Public comments generally opposed all bypass options considered in the EIS due to their potential for impacts on the natural environment (primarily surface waters and wetlands) and adverse "neighborhood" impacts (increased traffic, traffic-related noise, and potential for decreased property values).

Safety

- A high number of driveway access points exist along Highway 93 corridor in Whitefish.
- Crash rates within Whitefish were substantially higher than statewide averages for other urban areas. Intersection, intersection-related, driveway access, rear-end, and angle collisions on Highway 93 through Whitefish (includes highway north of Kalispell) occurred 3 to 10 times more often than statewide.

Parking

- US 93 reconstruction through downtown would result in the loss of on-street parking.

Pedestrian/Bicycle Facilities

- Public input during the development of the EIS, clearly indicated a preference for enhancing pedestrian and bicyclist facilities in corridor and incorporating separated pedestrian/bicycle paths wherever feasible.
- Highway improvements need to ensure connections with the City of Whitefish's planned pedestrian/bicyclist trails and facilities.

Air Quality

- Whitefish is designated as a Nonattainment area for PM-10 (small particulate matter) and particulates emissions will increase as the number of vehicle miles of travel increases.

Wetlands

- Delineated wetland sites exist along the Whitefish River. Road reconstruction and bridge building/modifications could cause minor impacts at several of these wetland areas.
- Replacing the existing Highway 93 culverts (at the south crossing of Whitefish River) with a bridge was considered but dropped from the Preferred Alternative for cost reasons.

Floodplains

- Road reconstruction could result in minor longitudinal encroachments of the 100-year floodplain of the Whitefish River. Construction of a new bridge (like the proposed structure at 7th Street identified in the Preferred Alternative) would also encroach on the 100-year floodplain of the river.

Cultural Resources

- The FEIS identified 37 properties in the Highway 93 corridor area that were on or eligible for the National Register of Historic Places or that contributed to proposed historic districts (Whitefish Historic Residential District or Whitefish Historic Business District).

Land Use

- Commercial strip development along US 93 contributes to traffic volumes and complexity of traffic movements in Whitefish.
- The residential character of neighborhoods along Spokane Avenue and Baker Avenue south of 7th Street should be preserved.

Aesthetics

- The community desires identified gateways at south and west edges of Whitefish and landscaping enhancements.

Input from the Highway 93 Citizens Working Group (CWG)

In early 2005, a Citizen Working Group (CWG) was established for the purpose of providing comments to the FHWA, MDT and its consultants, and local decision makers on critical issues and design details associated with the reconstruction of US 93 (as identified by the Preferred Alternative in the FEIS/ROD) for the Whitefish-Urban and Whitefish-West project areas. The Whitefish Highway 93 CWG consisted of citizens chosen to represent a variety of local interests. The CWG met six times with MDT and its design consultant during 2005. The CWG remains in place and continuing to be a sounding board for design issues associated with the Whitefish-West project.

Through a series of facilitated meetings, the CWG produced several "guiding principals" for rebuilding US 93 through Whitefish. These guiding principals (taken from CWG meeting summaries) are highlighted below:

- Economic vitality is linked to community character.
- Safe design for all traffic (pedestrians, bicycles, vehicles, trucks, buses, etc.) is important to enhancing the "Whitefish" experience for visitors as well as community members.
- Preserving the character and quality of life of Whitefish including a strong sense of small community; architectural and landscape aesthetics; and existing natural environs.
- The design for US 93 must be adaptable and flexible to accommodate future growth in the area.
- Reconstruction work must be completed in a timely, organized, and well-planned manner to mitigate overall impacts to the community.
- Blending useful and important parts of the Highway 93 Plan with the "Heart of Whitefish" Downtown Plan will result in positive short- and long-term outcomes for the community.
- Signals and crossing safety is most important for managing traffic flow and trucks—the priority is safety with common sense through managing traffic flow.

CWG meetings generally included a broad discussion of transportation and specific design issues and resulted in the development of two issues statements for design efforts on US 93. These issue statements are recounted below as shown in CWG meeting summaries.

- "***The final design needs to accommodate diverse bike traffic including touring cyclists, recreational cyclists, kids, commuter bikers, and family biking (with special equipment) and provide for safety for all bike users.*** In specific terms, the design should successfully interchange the recreation bike trail system with the Highway and determine where and how bike trails, paths and lanes should be located on and near Highway 93. The design should be logical and connect seamlessly with the community's current larger bike network as well as future plans."

- "***Truck traffic is a problem in Whitefish (e.g., Baker and Second) and the final design should attempt to mitigate that traffic through the community to the extent possible.*** Within this discussion, it's important to look at the difference between long-haul trucks moving through town to another destination and trucks working locally or delivering locally. The issues include safety, economics, and basically traffic flow. However it is solved, we recognize that it's going to change the status of Baker—and that controlling and slowing traffic flow on Baker is the key."

The summary for the CWG meeting in September 2005 documented several agreements based on discussions of bicycle accommodations as called for in the FEIS/ROD. The CWG recommended that the design for US 93 ensure bicycle facilities provided with highway reconstruction contribute to the City's trail system and that community parks adjoining Baker Avenue (on the north side of the Whitefish River) be connected by a trail crossing under the roadway.

Input from the Whitefish Downtown Master Plan

Early in 2006, the Whitefish City Council adopted the Downtown Business District Master Plan. The Plan was a joint project between the "Heart of Whitefish" downtown business association and the City. During the development of the Plan, the public was engaged numerous times to help identify and evaluate the long range opportunities and needs of the downtown business district.

The intent of the Whitefish Downtown Master Plan is to guide the development of privately- and publicly-owned parcels and offers strategies for improving the appearance, function, and vitality of the downtown area. The Master Plan has been adopted as a "neighborhood plan" pursuant to Montana law and will likely be adopted as part of Whitefish's new Growth Policy. With formal adoption by the City Council, the Downtown Master Plan now provides the legal authority to direct downtown development. The City's codes, ordinances and regulatory documents will ultimately be revised to be consistent with the Master Plan.

Downtown Whitefish's physical characteristics were evaluated to highlight its strengths and identify weaknesses. The Master Plan identified the following physical constraints or obstacles that need to be overcome or minimized:

- A lack of adequate parking.
- Pedestrian safety, traffic and circulation problems along Highway 93 through downtown.
- Poor "gateway" experiences from the south and east.
- The automobile and truck traffic along 2nd Street fragments the retail core along Central Avenue.

The Master Plan outlined several objectives for ensuring the long-term vitality and viability of the downtown relevant to reconstruction of the US 93 through Whitefish including:

- Creating a pedestrian-friendly environment to encourage visitors and residents to utilize downtown businesses.
- Ensuring that Highway 93 improvements enhance and support downtown businesses.
- Accommodating increasing traffic volumes without degrading downtown businesses and the retail environment.
- Locating and constructing new parking facilities to support downtown businesses and retail.
- Strengthening alternative transportation modes to reduce traffic congestion, including pedestrian, bicycle and transit.
- Protecting and connecting to the natural environment, which is a central feature in the community's appeal to visitors and residents.
- Utilizing the unique natural environment in proposals to strengthen the downtown business environment.
- Demonstrating how Whitefish can stimulate downtown development while managing highway corridor development.

The Plan places a very heavy emphasis on streetscape and pedestrian improvements to enhance the walkability of downtown and strengthen pedestrian connections to adjacent parklands and residential neighborhoods. Several key concepts for redeveloping the downtown area are identified and discussed below:

- **Establishing a Pedestrian Streetscape on 2nd Street (Spokane to Baker).** While 2nd Street must facilitate the movement of truck and automobile traffic as a part of US 93 system, the Plan advocates that it must not create an inhospitable pedestrian barrier that divides the retail district in half. Critical to the success of downtown, an improved, safe crossing at Central Avenue must be developed.

- **Developing the Whitefish Promenade - Shared Pedestrian/Bike Trail.** The shared pedestrian and bike trail elements create an identifiable pedestrian and bike loop around the downtown connecting with the city's existing and planned bike and pedestrian walkway system. One segment of the Whitefish Promenade is designated along Spokane Avenue, (west side of street) from 7th Street to Railway Street. It will serve as an amenity for development and provide safe and convenient off-street recreational access to downtown attractions. The Whitefish Promenade (proposed to be constructed within existing public rights-of-way) is intended to accommodate many users including pedestrians with infant strollers, low-speed bicyclists, rollerbladers and rollerskaters, joggers, and seasonal cross-country skiers.

- **Corridor Treatments for US 93 Gateways to Whitefish.** There are three primary transition gateways that occur at crossings over the Whitefish River (two locations on Highway 93). The design of these areas should demonstrate a transition from the highway corridor design treatment into the downtown pedestrian-oriented streetscapes. To improve the gateway into Whitefish along the west and south US 93 corridors, the Plan recommended the following design elements:

- High-quality and consistent design of directional and informational signage.
- Roadway border plantings of large conifer trees and native landscaping.
- Strategic landscape screening of highway corridor commercial uses.
- Signature lighting and sidewalk improvements across 2nd Street bridge.
- A distinctive bridge design for the proposed 7th Street crossing that minimizes impacts on the Whitefish River both visually and environmentally.

Input from the City's Growth Policy

Guidance on land use planning within the City of Whitefish and its jurisdictional area is provided by the Whitefish City-County Growth Policy adopted by the City Council on November 19, 2007. The new Growth Policy replaces the 1996 City-County Master Plan and is the result of a community-wide planning effort that began in January 2006. The Growth Policy reflects changed conditions in the Whitefish area since the 1996 Master Plan was adopted. A Growth Policy is required under Montana law for any local government intending to manage growth and development through zoning and subdivision regulations. The City-County Growth Policy establishes a vision to guide growth and development in the community over the next 20 years. The document also identifies goals and policies and recommends actions for achieving those goals.

The Growth Policy was developed around identified community values and the concept of sustainability. With respect to land use and transportation planning, the Growth Policy advocates sustainable development that supports a compact growth pattern, discourages sprawl, and provides opportunities for mixed and multiple uses of land to reduce or eliminate vehicle trips. The planning document indicates sustainable development patterns preserve transportation choices such as walking, transit, and cycling, as opposed to leaving a private automobile trip as the only viable transportation choice.

As part of this planning effort, City staff and a Growth Policy Steering Committee appointed by the Whitefish City Council conducted a community survey and undertook 16 "visioning sessions" during 2006. These public outreach efforts were conducted in an attempt to determine what residents want the community to look like and how it should function in the future. Participants at visioning sessions identified the attributes of the Whitefish community that they valued most and want to see preserved including:

- Small town feel and character
- Open spaces
- Scenic vistas
- Wildlife and wildlife habitat
- Public safety (the area's low crime rate and the ability to walk and bicycle in relative safety)

Comments from the 2006 community visioning sessions relevant to transportation and the Whitefish Urban corridor are summarized below:

Traffic Operations

- Congestion along Highway 93 results in traffic diversion to city streets not designated to carry through traffic (such as Baker and Columbia Avenues). Large truck traffic through Whitefish affects safety, environment, and downtown image.

- Community surveys showed support for connections between US 93 and Karrow, extending Baker Avenue to south, and a connection to Voerman Road along 13th Street.
- Community surveys also showed some opposition to a new 7th Street Bridge connecting Baker and Spokane Avenues (included with the Preferred Alternative in the FEIS/ROD).

Safety

- Driver safety is a concern at high-volume intersections with Highway 93.
- Cross streets and parallel streets are needed to improve access to businesses along Highway 93 South.
- Strip commercial development, a jumble of individual accesses onto U.S. Highway 93, an unsafe mix of highway speed traffic and traffic entering/leaving individual businesses are present on U.S. Highway 93 south.

Pedestrian/Bicycle Facilities

- Walking, running and bicycling are important activities and modes of transportation in the Whitefish area and there is broad support for bike trails and sidewalks.
- Safety for pedestrians and bicyclists, however, is compromised by lack of sidewalks and paths along busy, high-speed roads.

Natural Resources

- General support for environmental protection in community and recognition that natural resources are one of the community's greatest assets.

Land Use/Growth

- Considerable support for protecting traditional neighborhoods
- General support for downtown plan.
- General support for controlling and even limiting growth in the community.

Aesthetics

- Preserve trees
- Improve the appearance of highway corridors.

Other Transportation Modes

- Public transportation options in Whitefish are limited.
- Whitefish is a major terminal point on the BNSF Railway main line and community needs to continue to encourage travel on Amtrak.

Input from the Whitefish Transportation Plan

The City of Whitefish and MDT are developing a community transportation plan concurrently with the Urban Corridor Study. The plan includes: a comprehensive review of all existing transportation facilities; an assessment of current traffic operations; projections of future transportation demands in the community; and recommendations for desirable transportation improvements within the Whitefish area. In conjunction with the Transportation Plan, numerous opportunities for public input have been offered (to date) including: three public informational meetings; three meetings with

a Citizens Advisory Group formed specifically for the Transportation Plan and Corridor Study; and meetings with the Whitefish City Council and Whitefish City-County Planning Board. Additionally, public comments have been received via mail, phone, or e-mail since the initiation of this project.

The numerous comments received as a result of these meetings are not recounted here because meeting summaries have been prepared and are part of the project files. Appendix A in the Whitefish Transportation Plan includes a summary of public comments received during the development of the plan and appropriate responses.

In general, most of the comments received regarding the US 93 corridor mirror comments from the previously identified projects and community planning efforts. Topics most frequently discussed in these comments include (not in any order):

- Truck traffic in the downtown;
- A bypass around Whitefish;
- Non-motorized transportation and transit opportunities;
- Possible improvements to roadways paralleling or connecting to US 93; and
- Short-term operational improvements to relieve congestion at key intersections along the corridor (i.e. 2nd Street and Baker Avenue).

US 93 Corridor Issue Statements

The list of issues and comments identified through previous projects and planning efforts was thoroughly reviewed by the consultant team and all have merit for Whitefish Urban Corridor Study. However, many of the issues and comments are closely related and were combined to generate a set of issue statements to help guide the development of goals for the corridor study. A series of issue statements were presented as "Theme Boards" to the public and to the Citizens Advisory Committee for the Whitefish Transportation Plan/Urban Corridor Study in April 2007.

These statements, including minor refinements based on public comments received at the April 2007 meeting are presented below:

ISSUE	CORRESPONDING ISSUE STATEMENT
Traffic Operations	***Traffic and circulation problems exist along Highway 93 through downtown Whitefish and there is a lack of east-west and north-south road connections within the community.***
Safety	***Existing street configurations and development patterns, high traffic volumes, and numbers of access driveway accesses along the US 93 corridor contribute to safety concerns for motorists, pedestrians and bicyclists within the community.***
Trucks	***Truck traffic (including construction vehicles serving new developments) is a problem 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 possible.***

ISSUE	CORRESPONDING ISSUE STATEMENT
Parking	***Improvements to US 93 could impact parking availability in the downtown.***
Pedestrian/Bicycle Facilities	***Pedestrian and bicycle facilities are an essential and desirable element of the local transportation system.***
Natural Environment	***Transportation improvements have the potential to affect the natural environment, most notably at highway crossings of the Whitefish River.***
Human Environment	***Transportation improvements have the potential to affect historic properties, a potential historic residential district, and involve sites with hazardous materials concerns.***
Land Use/Growth	***The Whitefish area continues to grow at a rapid pace resulting in notable 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 be consistent with recommendations from the Whitefish Downtown Business District Master Plan.***
Aesthetics	***Preserving the character and "small town feel" is essential to Whitefish's economic vitality and quality of life.***

Vision Statement for Corridor Improvements

The task of developing a common vision for the corridor and a set of goals is essential and will help guide the development of design and 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 ongoing 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."***

The vision statement will be refined as needed throughout the development of the corridor study based on comments received from the MDT, FHWA, the City of Whitefish, the Citizens Advisory Committee, and the public.

Goals and Objectives for Improvements to the Corridor

While goals are more broad statements that support the vision, objectives are more focused statements of actions required to achieve established goals. Considering the vision presented above, a preliminary set of goals and associated objectives to support the vision and lay out a desired long-range outcome for the Whitefish Urban US 93 corridor were developed for review by the Project Oversight Committee, the Citizens Advisory Committee and the public.

These tentative goals and objectives are shown below:

Goal (Capacity Considerations): ***Preserve the role of US 93 as regional transportation route while ensuring its future performance and level of service as an urban principal arterial.***

Objectives

- Provide adequate connectivity to the regional and local transportation network.
- Provide adequate capacity and an acceptable Level of Service (define LOS target) to the year 2030 or beyond.
- Minimize congestion and delays for vehicles at intersections.
- Provide a design that manages truck traffic through the community in a safe and efficient manner and accommodates large vehicle movements at key intersections.
- Reduce the number of driveway access points existing along the corridor where possible.
- Accommodate multimodal transportation opportunities within the corridor.

Goal (Safety Considerations): ***Design improvements that provide a safe roadway and transportation environment for all facility users and those abutting the roadway.***

Objectives

- Provide a design that addresses identified high crash locations in the corridor.
- Provide a design that reduces opportunities for traffic conflicts within the corridor.
- Provide a design that manages truck traffic through the community in a safe and efficient manner.
- Reduce the number of driveway access points existing along the corridor where possible.
- Provide a design that presents a safe and accessible pedestrian environment for all users regardless of age or ability.
- Consider special design treatments at key pedestrian crossing locations in the corridor to help reduce crossing distances, enhance crosswalk visibility, and slow approaching vehicles.
- Provide roadway design treatments to accommodate bicyclists in a safe manner consistent with guidance from the City of Whitefish's Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan.

Goal (Eliminate Roadway Deficiencies): ***Ensure improvements are consistent with MDT's geometric design criteria for urban principal arterials wherever practicable.***

Objectives

- Eliminate deficient roadway features through the application of basic design controls and geometric design criteria appropriate for the corridor and its setting.
- Seek a design exception if the proposed corridor design includes elements which do not meet MDT geometric design criteria for urban principal arterials.

Goal (Compatibility with Local Plans and Community Ideals): ***Provide transportation improvements in the corridor that are compatible with local land use and transportation plans and that are sensitive to aspects of the community valued by Whitefish's residents while maintaining mobility along the arterial.***

Objectives

- Design transportation improvements within the corridor to consider the recommendations of the Whitefish Downtown Business District Master Plan.
- Accommodate pedestrians and bicyclists in a safe manner consistent with the City of Whitefish's Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan.
- Balance transportation improvements with the preservation of Whitefish's unique "character" and quality of life.
- Identify opportunities to enhance the continuity of the adjoining street network and improve local mobility.
- Consider context sensitive solutions (CSS) to enhance the appearance of the corridor.

Goal (Environmental Effects): ***Provide transportation solutions that minimize impacts to the natural, cultural and social environment in the corridor where practicable.***

Objectives

- Minimize impact to Wildlife/Fisheries Habitat.
- Minimize impact to potential Threatened or Endangered Species and Habitat.
- Minimize impact to Wetlands and Waters of the US.
- Minimize impact to Floodplains.
- Minimize impacts to Whitefish "critical areas."
- Minimize impact to prime and unique farmlands.
- Ensure conformity with Air Quality standards.
- Minimize potential Noise impacts to sensitive receptors
- Minimize encroachment on Hazardous Materials Sites.
- Minimize impact to Cultural Resources.
- Minimize impact to Section 4(f)/6(f) Resources.
- Minimize impacts to potential Environmental Justice communities.
- Minimize socio-economic impacts.
- Minimize Right-of-Way (ROW) impacts.
- Ensure reasonable access to properties adjoining the highway.

- Minimize impacts to utilities.

Goal (Feasibility/Affordability/Public Acceptance): ***Ensure corridor improvements are feasible to implement, represent a reasonable expenditure of limited public funds, and are acceptable to the community.***

Objectives

- Ensure improvements are feasible to be implemented by MDT and FHWA.
- Ensure improvements can be constructed while maintaining traffic operations.
- Ensure relative construction and maintenance costs are in line with likely availability of funding.
- Ensure improvement strategy has a reasonable degree of public and political support.

Specific Corridor Needs

The specific needs for improvements to US 93 through Whitefish are based on the analysis and input received during past projects and ongoing planning efforts in the community. These needs are not discussed in any particular order on the following pages.

Traffic Congestion and Capacity

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 major reasons for considering improvements to US 93 through Whitefish is to provide for the efficient movement of traffic. To accomplish this, the facility must be designed to be capable of handling existing and future traffic at an acceptable Level of Service (LOS). City ordinances and subdivision regulations do not specify an acceptable LOS for streets within the community. LOS C is acceptable, but LOS B is desirable based on MDT's current operating standards. The U.S. Highway 93 Somers-Whitefish FEIS indicated (on page 1-8) that LOS D is used as a guide for design in urban areas on US 93. LOS D and E suggest progressively worse peak hour operating conditions. LOS F represents conditions where significant vehicle delays and congestion occur.

Traffic congestion is evident 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.

- Most unsignalized intersections along Spokane Avenue and Baker Avenue have a peak hour LOS of "D" or lower due to the inability for traffic from the side streets to make left-turns

or thru movements onto the corridor. The high volumes of two-way traffic along the corridor make these side street movements extremely difficult during peak hours.

- Based on the results of travel demand modeling for current traffic conditions, numerous sections of Spokane Avenue, 2nd Street, and Baker Avenue are approaching capacity or over capacity and currently operate at an undesirable LOS. Exceeding capacity suggests operating conditions of LOS E on these roadways. These sections include Spokane Avenue between Riverside Avenue and 1st Street, 2nd Street west of Baker Avenue, Baker Avenue north of 2nd Street, and Baker Avenue between 6th and 13th Streets.

- The LOS analyses based on the results of the travel demand model developed for the Whitefish Transportation Plan, suggest 6 intersections along Spokane Avenue and 6 intersections along Baker Avenue between 13th Street and 2nd Street would function at LOS D or E by the year 2030.

- Travel demand modeling for year 2030 traffic conditions, shows that 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 crossing would be approaching or exceeding capacity.

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

Crossing Spokane Avenue is sometimes difficult and poses safety issues for motorists, pedestrians, and bicyclists. There is also a need to improve connectivity across the corridor while minimizing adverse community effects.

Geometric or Design Deficiencies

Lane widths, shoulders, and parking areas along Spokane Avenue and 2nd Street are generally sufficient 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 truck movements, and some turn lanes have insufficient capacity. Addressing these needs can help relieve traffic congestion and better manage traffic flows through Whitefish.

The intersection of 2nd Street and Baker Avenue performs poorly due to the insufficient intersection geometry and traffic signalization compounded with the high traffic volumes using this intersection. A lack of designated turn lanes for eastbound and westbound traffic, along with no protected turning movements, causes this intersection to have problems. Additionally, the existing configuration of the intersection does not accommodate right turns by westbound large trucks making right turns at 2nd Street and Baker Avenue. Trucks often must wait until the opposing lane clears to make the right turn causing delays at the intersection. This deficient geometric layout is

supported further by two reported fixed object collisions with light standards at this intersection during a recent 3-year study period.

The U.S. Highway 93 Somers-Whitefish FEIS suggests a high number of driveway access points exist along Highway 93 corridor in Whitefish. A high number of access points often contribute to conflicts between through and turning traffic. Future improvements to Spokane Avenue and 2nd Street need to identify opportunities to combine or restructure approaches to help minimize traffic conflicts and enhance safety.

Traffic Safety

Over a three-year period beginning October 1, 2003 and ending September 30, 2006, 84 crashes were reported on Spokane Avenue between 13th and 2nd Streets and on 2nd Street between Spokane and Baker Avenues. Seventy-three (73) of the 84 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), Spokane Avenue and 2nd Street (11), and 2nd Street and Baker Avenue (14).

The crash analysis also showed the following information:

- 20 of the 84 reported crashes resulted in injuries to 29 people—including one pedestrian.

- All but 10 of the reported crashes involved two or more vehicles. The most common crashes along Spokane Avenue and 2nd Street were rear-end collisions (51%), right-turn/angle collisions (22%), sideswipe collisions (8%) and left turn collisions (8%).

- The accident severity rates and estimated crash rates at major intersections along the corridor are not considered overly high. However, the crash rates at Spokane Avenue's intersections with 13th, 4th, 3rd, and 2nd Streets and the intersection of 2nd Street and Baker Avenue are generally among the highest rates for all intersections evaluated in the Whitefish Transportation Plan.

- On Baker Avenue between 2nd and 13th Streets, a total of 24 crashes were reported during the three-year study period. Eight of these crashes produced injuries or possible injuries to 11 people and the remainder resulted in just property damage. Fifteen of the 24 crashes occurred at intersections along Baker Avenue with 6 crashes occurring at the intersection of Baker and 13th Street.

The types of collisions commonly experienced on the US 93 corridor are indicative of roadways experiencing periods of traffic congestion. Improvements to the overall safety performance of the corridor should result if the future design addresses the causes of traffic congestion at intersections along the corridor.

Trucks

There is a need to identify ways to improve the flow of large trucks passing through Whitefish on the US 93 corridor. Large truck traffic on US 93 adversely affects traffic operations, contributes to

congestion, presents safety concerns, and is inconsistent with the desires for the downtown presented in the Whitefish Downtown Business District Master Plan. Truck traffic is comprised both of large commercial transport vehicles (including chip and log trucks) passing through the community and commercial trucks serving businesses and new construction in the Whitefish area.

The presence of substantial numbers of large trucks inhibits traffic flows on US 93 and affects traffic operations at signalized intersections in the downtown area. The sheer size of the trucks coupled with the short queuing distances between intersections creates congestion problems along the corridor. The intersections in the downtown area are difficult for trucks to negotiate. The small corner radii and tight intersection geometry makes maneuvering large trucks very difficult and dangerous. Trucks are often times encroaching on other lanes while making turns. Fewer vehicles are able to queue at intersections with truck traffic.

The Somers-Whitefish FEIS/ROD indicated in 1995 that commercial trucks accounted for some 8-13% of traffic in the corridor. Data compiled in 2003 for a MDT design project showed that trucks comprise a notable share of the traffic present on the US 93 corridor during the AM and PM peak hours. The data showed trucks accounted for 10.5% to more than 21% of all vehicles passing through the intersections on US 93 during the AM peak hour. Through truck volumes were lower during the PM peak hour but they still ranged from about 2% to more than 12% of all vehicles depending on the location within the US 93 corridor.

Past input from the US Highway 93 CWG suggests design improvements for the corridor should attempt to redirect or reduce truck traffic through downtown Whitefish to the extent possible.

Consistency with Local Land Use Plans

Current land uses and future development within the Whitefish area are guided by the 2007 Whitefish City-County Growth Policy and the Whitefish Downtown Business District Master Plan (2005). 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 should be revitalized. The future land use plan identified in the Downtown Business District Master Plan is incorporated into the City's Growth Policy. Both documents recognize that a reciprocal relationship exists between land use and transportation. They also advocate that design and operational improvements to major arterial corridors like US 93 help improve the appearance and function of adjoining land uses, preserve community character, and serve non-motorized transportation needs in a manner consistent with the City's Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan.

The recommendations in the Whitefish Downtown Business District Master Plan will influence the future improvement of Spokane Avenue and 2nd Street. The Plan identifies a very specific design treatment (lane configuration, parking, and pedestrian features) on 2nd Street between Spokane and Baker Avenues. Most notably, the Plan calls for: limiting the width of 2nd Street at Central Avenue to two lanes; providing a raised intersection and prohibiting left turns at Central Avenue; and adding curb extensions at Central Avenue to minimize pedestrian crossing distances.

The Downtown Business District Master Plan supports the development of a couplet for US 93 using Spokane and Baker Avenues and the provision of a new bridge across the Whitefish River at 7th Street to link these streets. The Master Plan recommends the development of a portion of the

"Whitefish Promenade"— an off-street, multi-use recreational trail around the downtown— along the west side of Spokane Avenue north of 7th Street. Further, the Plan encourages the development of an community "gateway" at Spokane Avenue and 7th Street and the enhancing the US 93 corridor entering the City through roadway border plantings, strategic screening of highway corridor commercial uses, and signing and lighting improvements.

Local expectations are that the future improvement plans for Spokane Avenue and 2nd Street will be consistent with and support the recommendations for the US 93 corridor in the Downtown Business District Master Plan while maintaining mobility along the arterial.

Improve the Physical Condition of US 93 through Whitefish

Much of the existing roadway in the Whitefish Urban 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. US 93 constructed under several projects:

Reference Point (RP) 122.456 – 127.031	PLH 5-3(63) 126F	1998
RP 127.031 – 127.540	F 270 9	1961
RP 127.540 – 127.683	F 270 90	1974
RP 127.683 – 127.740	City Construction	1960
RP 127.740 – 127.882	NRM 98 C	1938

While the existing highway has been well maintained, most of Spokane Avenue and 2nd Street within the corridor study area is nearly 50 years old and its key infrastructure components need upgrading. For example, the traffic signals along 2nd Street are old and should be upgraded with equipment that can provide for varied phasing/timing schemes and protected left turns at appropriate locations.

Enhance Pedestrian and Bicyclist Facilities along the Corridor

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 Pedestrian and Bikeway Master Plan, the US 93 corridor (Spokane Avenue and 2nd Street) is designated as a proposed bike route with links to other designated bike routes and pedestrian paths. Numerous other designated pedestrian or bicyclist trails cross or parallel US 93

The Downtown Business District Master Plan and City-County Growth Policy make it clear that walking and bicycling are inherent to the community's lifestyle and viewed as an essential part of the local transportation system. Input from the US Highway 93 Citizens Working Group suggests future design improvements for the corridor should recognize the needs of various trail users and ensure planned facilities along US 93 connect with the community's current and planned network of pedestrian and bike trails.

Future improvements to US 93 must include components that support the community's vision for non-motorized transportation and make connections to the City's planned trail network.

Aesthetics and Preservation of Community Character

Recent Whitefish planning efforts and associated citizen input have reinforced the need for US 93 improvements to preserve features of the community that make Whitefish unique and protect or enhance natural areas. The City's Growth Policy calls for protecting natural areas and traditional neighborhoods and avoiding development that is out of scale with its surroundings as ways to help preserve community character.

The Downtown Business District Master Plan also makes specific recommendations for aesthetic treatments along Spokane Avenue and 2nd Street and calls for the development of a new community gateway at Spokane Avenue and 7th Street with attractive signage. These design treatments are viewed as essential to meeting the established vision for Whitefish's downtown area.

With this in mind, future improvements to US 93 need to include elements that are consistent with the enhancements and aesthetic treatments desired by the community.

Transit and Intermodal Transportation

Public transit services in Whitefish are currently limited and are not available throughout the entire year. However, public input during the Whitefish Transportation Plan suggests a strong environmental ethic and a general community desire to begin thinking about the type and extent of transit services that may best work within the community. Some comments also recognized the benefits for area residents and visitors provided by a transit system that 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 development of transit related facilities along Spokane Avenue and 2nd Street.

Develop Improvements that can be Implemented and Funded

As managers of public funds, both the MDT and the Federal Highway Administration 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.

Recommended improvements should be implementable. 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 conductive 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 also minimize disruptions and street closures to traffic.

In January 2008, the FHWA issued new 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 that must be met for a proposed project prior to FHWA signing a Record of Decision

(ROD) for an EIS, a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for an Environmental Assessment, or approving a Categorical Exclusion (CE) for a project. This has relevance to the Whitefish urban corridor since improvements to US 93 were previously addressed in an EIS and improvements 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 FEIS Reevaluation or a Supplemental EIS for the Whitefish Urban project area).

The FHWA's guidance indicates that before FHWA can sign a ROD or FONSI, or approve a CE 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 Plan (STIP). **Regionally significant projects** typically include projects on a facility which serves regional transportation needs and typically includes principal arterial highways like US 93. 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 planning regulations require that the STIP contain all regionally significant projects requiring an action by FHWA irrespective of the project's funding source. In order for FHWA to sign a ROD or FONSI, or approve a CE for a project or phase of a project, the STIP must show all phases of the project planned within the time frame of the STIP. This can include or be limited to non-construction funding (e.g., preliminary engineering, final design, right-of-way, utilities relocation) if there are phases of the project that are planned beyond the horizon of the STIP. Those phases of the project beyond the 4-year horizon of the STIP do not have to be shown in the STIP. For example, the STIP might include final design for a project, but not construction.

With respect to future improvements on US 93 through Whitefish, 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 a reconstruction project or individual phases of such a project. Given the current funding situation for transportation improvements in Montana, it is unlikely that all funding needed to implement corridor improvement will be available at the conclusion of a future NEPA/MEPA process. For this reason, a logical phased approach to implementing corridor improvements will likely be necessary. Logical project phasing, if appropriate, will need to be identified prior to FHWA approving a future environmental document for the project.

Corridor "Needs" Versus "Purpose and Need"

The corridor "needs" discussed in this Memo are important considerations for the future NEPA and MEPA process that must be undertaken by MDT and FHWA. The identified corridor needs are directly relevant to the purpose and need discussions found in environmental documents like the U.S. Highway 93 Somers-Whitefish FEIS.

The purpose and need section is one of the most important parts of an environmental document 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

consideration, in-depth analysis, and ultimate selection. Without a well-defined, well-established and well-justified purpose and need, it will be difficult during the NEPA/MEPA to determine which alternatives are reasonable, prudent and practicable, and it may be impossible to dismiss the no-build alternative.

The alternatives considered in the U.S. Highway 93 Somers-Whitefish 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 FEIS noted the following secondary benefits which are anticipated to occur as a result of improvements to US 93:

- 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.

A Reevaluation of the FEIS as it relates to MDT's Whitefish-West project was completed during 2007. This document concluded the purpose and need for the Whitefish-West project on US 93 has not changed from that identified in the FEIS.

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.

With the original FEIS purpose and need in mind, future improvements to US 93 through Whitefish must:

- incorporate physical changes to the roadway and its adjoining environment so the facility complies with MDT's geometric design criteria for Urban Principal Arterials;

- provide a transportation facility that meets current and future demands;

- improve the operation and efficiency of the facility for the traveling public by incorporating measures to enhance traffic flows and better manage truck traffic in the corridor;

- reduce opportunities for traffic conflicts and crashes associated with turning movements at major intersections and other corridor locations;

- provide facility improvements that consider recommendations made in the City's Growth Policy and Downtown Business District Master Plan; and

- ensure future improvements help maintain the character of the community by being sensitive to the surrounding natural environment and land uses.