

DRAFT Bowers Hill Interchange Study Working Group Minutes – January 22, 2021

Pursuant to the declared state of emergency in the Commonwealth of Virginia in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and to protect the public health and safety of the Working Group members, staff, and the general public, the Bowers Hill Interchange Study Working Group meeting was held electronically via Zoom. These electronic meetings are required to complete essential business on behalf of the region. A recording of the meeting is available on the website.

Attendance:

Troy Eisenberger – Chesapeake
Bryan Stilley – Newport News
Rob Brown - Norfolk
Deborah Mangiaracina – Norfolk
Carl Jackson – Portsmouth
Robert Lewis - Suffolk
Todd Halacy – VDOT
Samba Secka – VDOT
Scott Smizik – VDOT
Eric Stringfield – VDOT
Chris Hall - VDOT
Nina Ullrich – VDOT
Barbara Nelson – VPA
Kevin Page - HRTAC
Pavithra Parthasarathi – HRTPO
Rob Case - HRTPO
Keith Nichols – HRTPO

The meeting started at 9:35 am.

- Ms. Parthasarathi read the introduction detailing that this was an electronic meeting.
- Item 2 – Approval of Agenda
 - The agenda was approved by consensus.
- Item 3 – Public Comments
 - No comments from the public were received prior to the meeting.
- Item 4 – Approval of Minutes
 - The minutes of the September 25, 2020 meeting were reviewed. Mr. Jackson made a motion to approve the minutes and Mr. Eisenberger seconded. The minutes were approved by consensus.

- Item 5 – General Study Update and Item 6 – Next Steps
 - Mr. Smizik made a presentation on the Bowers Hill Interchange Study Environmental Impact Statement, which included Items 5-6 on the agenda.
 - Mr. Smizik began the presentation by going over the study schedule. He noted that the Notice of Intent (NOI) will be the official start of EIS study and that they are still aiming for that in May 2021. Mr. Smizik added that one of the first actions of the new administration was to rescind the One Federal Decision (OFD) policy which will impact the issuance of permits. The two-year timeline, however, doesn't go away because other agency regulations are still in place. Mr. Smizik added that how we move forward with this is currently a gray area but he hopes to have more direction to share by next month's meeting.
 - Mr. Lewis asked if the biggest impacts moving forward would be that the two year issuance of permits could slip. Mr. Smizik responded that there are two paths forward based on whether or not the schedule holds and permits are issued by May 2023.
 - Mr. Hall added that we'll figure this out in collaboration with our federal partners, but that this may provide for more flexibility in the schedule. Mr. Smizik added that we should have this figured out before the NOI is issued. Mr. Page added that it also could buy additional time for project financing.
 - Mr. Smizik introduced the Range of Concepts and showed typical sections for each of the concepts. He noted that they were looking for an initial reaction on the concepts from this group, but that all of these concepts would not necessarily move forward for analysis.
 - Mr. Page noted that the cross sections should have a wider shoulder in the median for possible drivable shoulders. As we look at the range of options, we need to make sure we don't preclude drivable shoulders in the median with too narrow of shoulder. Mr. Smizik agreed and noted that we need to ensure consistency with local and regional plans such as the Hampton Roads Express Lanes. Perhaps the best way to meet local and regional plans is to make the inside shoulder 16' under all options to ensure the possibility of hard shoulder running. Mr. Smizik added that they would need to discuss this with FHWA to see how they should indicate this in the study.
 - Mr. Smizik asked the group if traffic levels warrant one lane or two, and Mr. Page responded that +1 managed lane and a drivable shoulder would be consistent with regional plans. However, this may be an issue in the section with median rail. Mr. Jackson added that we should make sure we're consistent with the High Rise Bridge corridor, to which Mr. Page noted that the High Rise corridor will have +1 managed lane with a wide shoulder that can accommodate use as traffic levels rise.
 - Mr. Jackson asked which concept matches the High Rise, to which Mr. Page responded that none of these concepts currently match what is at the High Rise. Mr. Smizik replied that they will be adding this by widening the shoulder on Concept #5.
 - Mr. Smizik noted that they will adjust these options and bring the updated concepts to the February NEPA meeting.
 - Mr. Stilley asked if the eventual widening of MMMBT has the same layout as is coming to HRBT, do we need to do anything as part of this study to make sure that it compliments

future MMMBT widening and does not impinge on that flexibility. Mr. Smizik responded that this is a standalone project and should not lead to any issues with flexibility in future studies or projects for MMMBT widening.

- Mr. Stillely noted that there is quite a bit of distance between College Drive and the Hampton Roads Harbor where these projects could transition between each other. Mr. Case added that the tunnel is not a flexible area, so it is important that this study melds with any future MMMBT widening, maybe even more than if it melds with the High Rise Bridge corridor. Mr. Page added that tunnels would need to be added either to the east or to the west at the MMMBT.
- Mr. Smizik responded that Spring/Summer time will be a good time to dig even further into these issues as we move forward.
- Mr. Smizik noted that reversible lanes would be a policy decision that we will be discussing more at future meetings. Mr. Page added that we are required to have a connected system in order to collect tolls. As part of the HOT network we will be building shoulder lanes in the opposite direction of the current reversible lanes. He added that reversible lanes can also lead to a reduction of overall toll revenues, especially if there's a reversible system in the middle of a directional system. This could be a policy train wreck.
- Mr. Smizik mentioned the TSM/TDM concept and transit. He noted that historically TSM/TDM is given limited consideration but will be looked at more as part of this study. This is going on concurrently with VDOT's I-64/I-664 study, but that study has very limited TSM/TDM candidates including potential extension of acceleration lanes. Mr. Smizik also noted that the transit fixed guideway option was not recommended by DRPT and will likely not move forward.
- Mr. Jackson mentioned that we need to consider park and ride concepts with TDM.
- Regarding the transit option, Mr. Page mentioned that there was a \$3.5 million pledge for enhanced transit for the reversible HOV/HOT conversion project. He added that HRTAC also includes transit funding now through HRRTF, and hopefully DRPT can transfer this \$3.5 million to HRTAC to include in additional regional transit funding.
- Mr. Smizik noted that there appears to be a desire to have some inclusion of transit and TSM/TDM as part of these alternatives moving forward. Mr. Jackson agreed that it is part of the overall solution and we need to have the facilities to support those that want to use alternative modes. Mr. Page added that one component of scoring for SMART SCALE is aspects like park and ride lots. It's helpful to have a range of options to choose from as a transportation component and not just as an alternative.
- Mr. Stillely noted that we're looking at least 15-20 years before any future tunnel work, but it would be nice if this study provides a method of going for piecemeal SMART SCALE funding. Mr. Smizik added that this group should consider including this as separate NEPA studies, since federal agencies have to look at permitability of these facilities if included as part of this NEPA. Mr. Page added that if we can find a way for this to be precursor to MMMBT widening, with aspects like park and ride lots, that will help. Modeling has shown that traffic shifts will likely occur with any future MMMBT widening.

- Mr. Smizik introduced the Bowers Hill Interchange Concepts. He noted that the plan is not to determine Express Lanes connections through Bowers Hill but to save the footprint to make this decision later.
- Mr. Page asked if the Express Lanes through Bowers Hill will be similar to Northern Virginia with open areas for weaving. Mr. Smizik replied that for this study they would not prescribe any decision on that but allow a footprint for flexibility for that decision to be made by the region later. Mr. Jackson added that he would recommend connections to allow for improved movement through the interchange.
- Mr. Smizik presented an Introduction of Resources in the Corridor.
- Mr. Page noted that DRPT brought up the conversation of the future of median rail in the corridor, and Mr. Smizik added that the Port has provided a number of plans regarding future rail connections for the region. He hopes to bring back a summary of this to the February NEPA meeting.
- Mr. Page noted that rail pumps water from the depression near the I-664/Bridge Rd interchange into the green areas of the interchange under a permit between VDOT and the Commonwealth Railway.
- Mr. Page added that there have been discussions on future consideration of a direct connection between Class I railroads to the Port via the I-664 median through Bowers Hill. This will need to be discussed further as we look at alternatives to the south of Pughsville Rd.
- Mr. Smizik plans to come back to this group in February with much more information regarding rail.
- Mr. Smizik noted that this corridor is not only really wet but also really wet near the interchanges. There are also some cemeteries and other burial areas in the vicinity of the corridor.
- Mr. Smizik wrapped up the meeting by detailing Next Steps. These include:
 - Continuing discussion of the range of concepts at the February NEPA meeting as well as a February meeting of this committee.
 - The study schedule won't be finalized in February due to impacts of OFD changes this week. Discussing the permitting assumptions may be pushed back from March as well due to the OFD changes.
 - Public involvement will still occur in March 2021 through a narrated presentation.
 - The alternatives that will be included in the study will be discussed at the April NEPA meeting so concurrence can tentatively occur at the May NEPA meeting.
- Mr. Smizik noted that the CTB was briefed on this study this week, and that they will also be briefed on the study in early 2022.

The meeting adjourned at 11:15 am.