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Circ-Williston EIS

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Circ A/B Boulevard is Preferred Alternative

Design refinements substantially reduce wetland impacts over previous plans

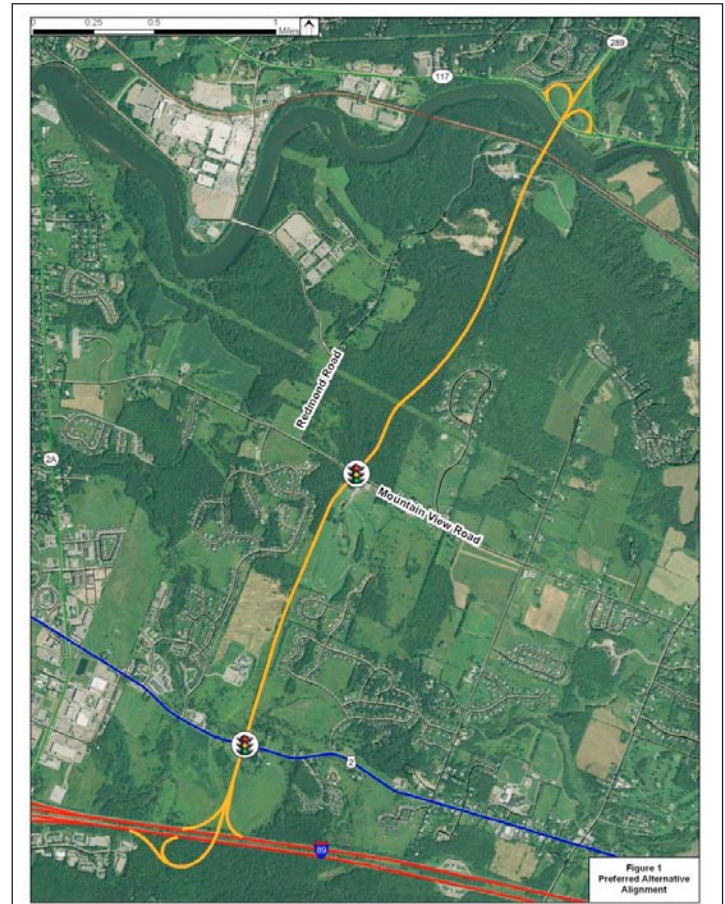
The Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans) and Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) are recommending the Circ A/B Boulevard as the Preferred Alternative in a Final Environmental Impact Statement for the A/B segment of the Circ-Williston Transportation Project.

This alternative is a modified version of the Circ A/B Alternative 17 analyzed in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement. It is based on extensive consideration of the ability of various alternatives to meet the transportation needs of the project, environmental and community impacts, public and agency comments and additional analyses on how to reduce wetland impacts.

The Preferred Alternative would be located primarily within the existing Circ A/B corridor right-of-way acquired in the early 1990's. The design involves a trumpet interchange with I-89 in Williston, signalized intersections with U.S. 2 and Mountain View Road, and a connection to VT 289 and VT 117 in Essex. It would feature two travel lanes in each direction, separated by an 8 to 16 foot wide raised median (see graphic, below). The speed limit on the new roadway would be 40 mph, minimizing noise and other community character impacts for adjacent residential areas in Williston.

The Preferred Alternative shifts the original Circ alignment in the vicinity of the Circ A/B crossing of Mountain View Road. Moving the roadway slightly easterly was suggested by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to minimize impacts to the forested wetland north of Mountain View Road, which includes an amphibian pool used by wood frogs (see Figure 3, page 3).

The alignment shift would require a full acquisition of a 1.7 acre vacant parcel adjacent to Mountain View Road and a less-than-one acre partial property acquisition from the Catamount Golf



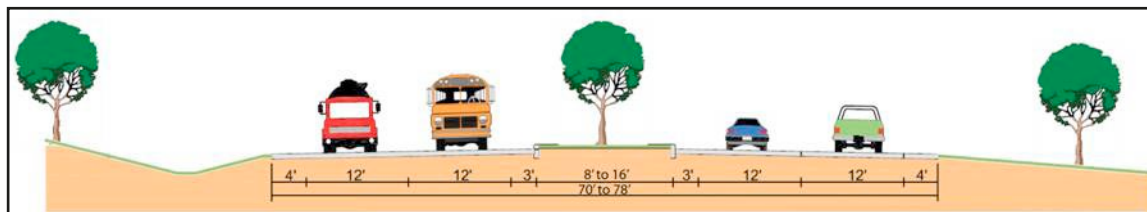
Preferred A/B Boulevard Alignment

Course. The property acquisition is not expected to impact the layout and use of the golf course.

The Preferred Alternative would have direct permanent wetland impacts of approximately 22 acres, 12 acres less than the impacts of Alternative 16a (the DEIS designation of the previous design for the A-B segment of the Chittenden County Circumferential Highway).

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Cross Section View of Preferred Alternative – A/B Boulevard



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Key factors in the Preferred Alternative decision included transportation benefits, community impacts and environmental impacts.

Transportation Benefits. The Preferred Alternative best meets the transportation purpose of the project by reducing travel times and congestion throughout the project area, without creating new transportation problems. Improvements to VT 2A would solve some of the problems, but would create new problems at the same time. For example, a four-lane VT 2A and the associated increase in traffic volumes would make it substantially harder for side-street traffic to access VT 2A and would increase traffic volumes and congestion on the legs leading in and out of the Five Corners.

The Preferred Alternative would improve traffic flow on VT 2A, eliminating Level of Service F conditions and reducing congestion on all severely congested roadway segments. The Preferred Alternative would also reduce crashes in the project area and substantially improve mobility in the project area.

For example, in the AM peak period, in the peak direction (trips from Essex to Williston), the Preferred Alternative would reduce the weighted average trip length by four minutes or 18 percent when compared to the No Build Alternative. In addition to effects on VT 2A, the Preferred Alternative would reduce traffic volumes and congestion on North Williston Road, VT 15 and VT 117.

Community Impacts. Widening VT 2A would increase traffic volumes through residential portions of Williston and Essex Junction, require numerous property acquisitions that would reduce setbacks for adjacent residences and remove street trees, and would have adverse impacts on several historic properties.



Widening Rte 2A would have impacted a number of historic buildings and trees, changing the character of the corridor. Photo of the intersection of VT Rte 2A and Rte 15 at Five Corners, Essex Junction.

The increase in traffic volumes and speeds on VT 2A would result in up to 84 impacted noise receptors based on FHWA criteria (an increase of 38 over the No Build condition). A roundabout at Five Corners in Essex Junction would impact Veterans Memorial Park. In addition, the Village of Essex Junction, which owns and controls certain segments of the necessary right-of-way for a Route 2A or Hybrid Alternative, has passed a resolution opposing these alternatives.

The Preferred Alternative would have a lower speed limit (40 mph) and a narrower cross section than the limited access highway Circ A/B Alternatives. As a result, the Preferred Alternative would not result in any noise impacts in the Circ A/B corridor based on FHWA noise impact criteria.

The Preferred Alternative would result in visual impacts, particularly for the suburban residential developments along the planned route, but the degree of impact would be minor in comparison to the community and visual disruption that would be caused by widening VT 2A to four lanes in Essex Junction.

The visual impacts of the Preferred Alternative have been minimized through the selection of the boulevard design, which involves a substantially narrower roadway than a limited access highway and the opportunity for trees and other plantings in the raised median. Potential visual screening measures for adjacent residential areas will be considered in detail during the final design process.

Environmental Impacts. While the natural resource impacts of the Preferred Alternative are greater than the VT 2A and Hybrid Alternatives, these impacts can be reasonably mitigated. The community and historic impacts of the VT 2A and Hybrid Alternatives cannot be reasonably mitigated.

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The natural resource impacts of the Preferred Alternative have been minimized to the greatest degree possible, without compromising transportation performance. Avoidance and minimization measures have included the development of the easterly alignment shift, reductions in median widths in some areas, changes in ramp geometry, and extensive consideration of alternative locations/configurations for stormwater treatment basins and access roads to avoid wetland and wildlife habitat areas.

Mapping of all the alternatives evaluated in detail in the Circ-Williston EIS is provided in Chapter 4 of the DEIS, available at: http://www.circeis.org/documents/study_documents/draft_eis/Chapter%204.pdf

Additional environmental impact analysis conducted on Preferred Alternative

At the request of U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service additional analyses of “secondary impacts” were conducted after the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) was completed.

Secondary impacts are considered potential disturbances to the ecosystem resulting from a project that must be taken into account when applying for permits and complying with regulations of the Clean Water Act.

For example, the placement of fill in one portion of a wetland may have hydrologic effects on the function of the remaining wetland area outside of the project footprint. Secondary impacts also include issues such as wildlife habitat fragmentation and related effects on species.

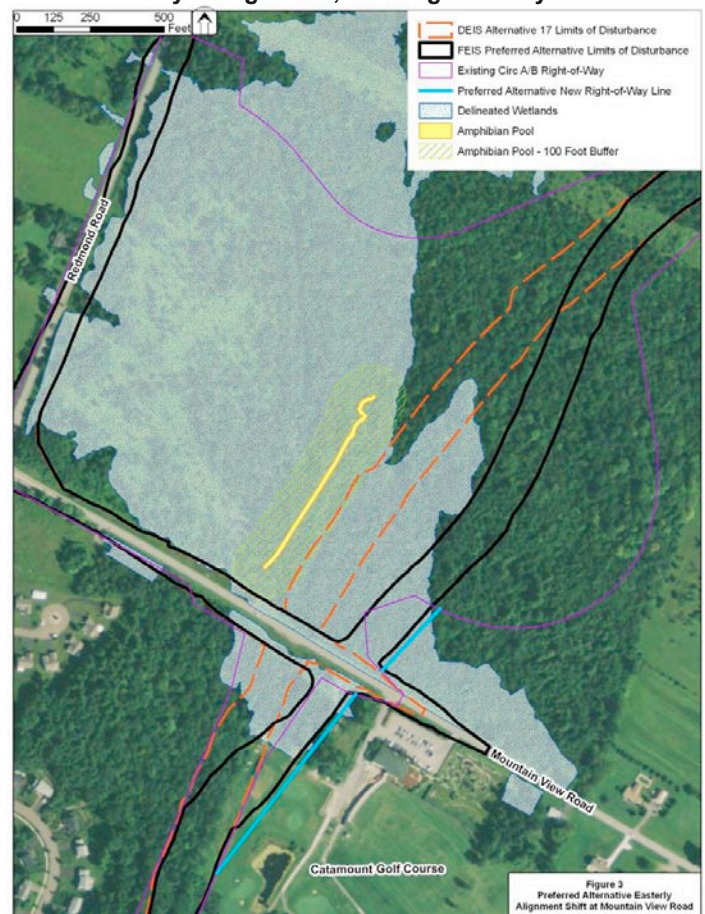
While the DEIS contained a *qualitative* assessment of potential secondary wetland and wildlife habitat impacts associated with the all the alternatives, VTrans and FHWA conducted a detailed *quantitative* secondary impact analysis for wetlands and wildlife habitat, focused on the Preferred Alternative.

The secondary impact analysis effort, extensively coordinated with U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, included:

- A wetland-by-wetland evaluation of secondary impacts on wetland functions and services.
- Detailed stream and river crossing impact assessment, including the development of new bridge structure designs to minimize impacts at the Allen Brook and Redmond Creek crossings.

- Detailed analysis of habitat edge effects, including analysis of the effects of the project on the size and configuration of interior habitat fragments, potential effects on forest interior bird species, and an analysis of potential traffic noise effects on sensitive bird species.

Realignment of A/B Boulevard to avoid wetlands - Original route shown by orange lines, new alignment by black lines



Wetland, stream and wildlife mitigation site search is underway

The Vermont Agency of Transportation is actively seeking sites to compensate for unavoidable impacts to US waters and wetlands. Mitigation is required by Section 404 of the Clean Water Act and regulated by Vermont Wetland Rules (Section 8.5) for the Preferred Alternative to be built.

VTrans has involved state and federal regulatory and resource agencies in the development of the wetland mitigation goals, methodology, and field visits. It has focused its search on a portion of the Champlain Valley region, from the Crown Point Bridge in the Town of Addison to the Canadian border, to identify potential sites suitable for wetland restoration.

A GIS-based analysis was conducted to identify potential sites for wetland restoration based on broad scale screening measures such as aerial photography, topography, land cover, and soils. Following the screening, field reviews of the potential sites were made to evaluate on-the-ground whether restoration is feasible.

Landowners of potential sites have been contacted to determine if they would be willing to sell their property or would be interested in granting in a conservation easement. A short-list of the most promising wetland restoration sites will be described in the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and permit application along with conceptual restoration plans. While a final site will not be selected at this stage, sufficient mitigation options will be presented to demonstrate that the project impacts can be mitigated.

A site search is also being conducted for stream and wildlife habitat mitigation. For stream mitigation, the options under

consideration include improvements to deficient stream crossings in the project area and improvements to an unstable reach of Allen Brook in the vicinity of the Circ A/B crossing.

VTrans intends that wildlife habitat impacts will be mitigated through the preservation of land on or adjacent to the wetland mitigation sites. The wildlife habitat mitigation objectives include the creation of amphibian pool habitat to replace those being impacted by the project.

Next Steps: Final EIS Distribution and Record of Decision

VTrans and FHWA intend to issue the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) early in 2010. The FEIS will contain responses to all comments received on the Draft EIS (DEIS) and during the public hearings, document the additional analyses and agency coordination conducted since the DEIS, describe the impact mitigation; and explain the reasons for recommending Circ A/B Boulevard as the Preferred Alternative. The FEIS will be distributed to all those who commented on the DEIS and made available for review at convenient locations in the project area and on the project website. The FEIS comment period will be 30 days.

Two public informational meetings will be held in the project area early in the FEIS comment period. After the FEIS comment period, FHWA and VTrans will analyze the comments and prepare the FEIS Record of Decision. The FHWA Record of Decision on the project is expected in 2010, allowing the project to move forward with final design, permitting, right-of-way acquisition, and construction.

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