



U.S. Department
of Transportation

**Federal Highway
Administration**

P.O. Box 568
Montpelier, VT 05601

July 24, 2008

In Reply Refer To:

Christine Godfrey, Chief
Regulatory Division
New England District
Army Corps of Engineers
696 Virginia Road
Concord, MA 01742-2751

Subject: Circ – Williston Transportation Project
Identification of an FEIS Preferred Alternative and
Recommendation for a Section 404 LEDPA Determination

Dear Ms. Godfrey:

Enclosed please find an assessment of the traffic performance of the Circ-Williston Transportation project alternatives in meeting the basic project purpose (Traffic Memo), and an assessment of the feasibility and prudence of the Circ A/B Alternatives for avoiding Section 4(f) resources that would be impacted by the other alternatives (Feasible and Prudent Avoidance Alternatives Memo). Based on consideration of the facts presented in these documents, the DEIS, public and agency comments, and additional analyses generated in response to comments, FHWA and VTrans have determined that the preferred alternative for the Circ-Williston Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) can only be in the Circ A/B corridor, and are recommending the selection of a Circ A/B corridor alternative as the Army Corps of Engineer's Least Environmentally Damaging Practicable Alternative (LEDPA) in the Section 404 process.

Although the Circ A/B Alternative best meets the transportation needs of the project area this was only one factor considered in our recommendation. We also needed to consider that the natural resource impacts of the Circ A/B Alternatives can be reasonably mitigated, while the community and historic resource impacts of the VT 2A Alternatives cannot. These factors play an important role in our recommendation because of the Section 4(f) laws that govern how we must evaluate and weigh the alternatives.

Summary of Ability to Meet Transportation Needs

The Circ A/B Alternatives substantially outperform the VT 2A and Hybrid Alternatives in providing mobility to, from, and within the project area as a result of reductions in congestion and the provision of a new Winooski River crossing. The Circ A/B Alternatives would also be substantially more effective than other alternatives in diverting traffic and reducing congestion on other project area roadways, including VT 15, VT 117, and North Williston Road. The VT 2A alternatives leave traffic volumes on these other roadways at or over their capacity.

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While other alternatives can improve through traffic flow along VT 2A through widening and intersection improvements, these alternatives cause other transportation problems. Alternative 3 and 19 in particular perform satisfactorily for many of the transportation performance measures. However, these alternatives have other unintended consequences including increased delays for drivers accessing VT 2A from the numerous side streets and driveways along the corridor. These side-street delays in turn create a safety problem as drivers would be likely to take greater risks by selecting smaller gaps in the traffic flow when making turns onto VT 2A. In addition, the capacity of VT 2A roundabouts proposed as part of Alternatives 3 and 19 would be exceeded, leading to extensive traffic backups at major intersections.

Alternatives involving a roundabout at Five Corners (3, 22, 19 and 23) involve pedestrian safety issues that the Village of Essex Junction has indicated would need to be addressed through signalized pedestrian crossings or crossing guards. Addressing the pedestrian safety issue would degrade the transportation performance of the roundabout by interrupting the traffic flow. In addition the problems at the roundabouts and side street delays negatively affect emergency vehicle response time. While some of the transportation problems associated with Alternatives 3 and 19 could be mitigated, all of the problems cannot be solved without creating other unacceptable impacts. Circ A/B Alternatives 16a and 16c remedy the project area transportation problems and do not create substantial new transportation problems. For these reasons, it can be concluded that a Circ A/B corridor alternative best meets the transportation needs of the project area.

Summary of Environmental Impacts

There are environmental impacts associated with all of the alternatives under consideration. The tradeoffs in environmental impacts between the VT 2A and Circ A/B Alternatives, as well as the ability to mitigate for the different impacts under each alternative have been carefully considered.

The Circ A/B Alternatives result in greater wetland and wildlife habitat impacts than the VT 2A Alternatives. However, studies show that the majority of the wetland impacts are to relatively low value wetlands that were farm fields in the recent past. In addition, the Circ A/B corridor is surrounded by existing and planned development. The VT 2A Alternatives involve substantial community impacts, including loss of roadway setbacks and increased traffic volumes through the Essex Junction village center, conflicts with local plans, and a high level of opposition from local officials and residents. All of the VT 2A Alternatives also result in numerous impacts to historic resources along the VT 2A corridor. All of the VT 2A Alternatives require right-of-way that is not available to VTrans. By utilizing a route long-planned for transportation purposes, the Circ A/B Alternatives do not cause community disruption or impact any historic properties.

The natural resource impacts of the Circ A/B Alternatives can be minimized, and unavoidable impacts can be mitigated. In fact, for the original Circ Highway Section 404 permit the Corps had agreed to mitigation at the 55 acre Lemire site, in part for 15.7 acres of wetland impacts in the Circ A/B corridor, which included impacts to the higher value wetlands in the current EIS. The Lemire site was subsequently accepted by the Corps as a functional wetland after the five year monitoring period. However, the community and historic resource impacts of the VT 2A Alternatives are not as amenable to mitigation. Impacted park and historic sites cannot be mitigated with replacement land or resources in the same manner as the natural resource impacts of the Circ A/B Alternatives can be mitigated. It is important to note that VTrans and FHWA have not yet finalized natural

resource mitigation for the Circ A/B Alternatives, and will continue to coordinate with the resource agencies in developing effective mitigation strategies.

In light of the fact that our traffic studies show that the VT 2A alternatives do not meet the purpose and need, that the VT 2A alternatives have significant historical and parkland impacts that preclude FHWA from funding those alternatives, we are recommending that the Corps find the Circ A/B corridor as the LEDPA.

Sincerely,

/S/ Ernest Blais

Ernest Blais
Division Administrator

Enclosures

cc: Marty Abair, ACOE
Robert Varney, EPA
Bill Neidermyer, USFWS
Neale Lunderville, VTrans