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January 31, 2011

Mr. Gerald L. Solomon, Director
Office of Project Development and Environmental Review
Federal Highway Administration
1200 New Jersey Ave., SE
Washington, DC 20590

(Also via email to Gerald.Solomon@dot.gov)

Dear Mr. Solomon:

We are writing about a project proposed by the Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) to improve a section of SR 115/US 129 located in the City of Alcoa, Blount County Tennessee (current TDOT designation "SR 115/US 129 - Relocated Alcoa Highway Blount").

By way of background, local officials requested TDOT to design improvements for this corridor. The first plan was originally developed in 1998-1999 to widen the corridor, eliminate median crossovers, install concrete barriers and extend existing limited access frontage roads. A public meeting on the project's Environmental Assessment was held on May 16, 2000. Two alternatives were presented, the requested improvements and "no-build."

Public sentiment was generally favorable, although a few businesses affected by right of way acquisition objected and others said they would only support it with some suggested changes. TDOT was ready to proceed with the project based on the proposed build alternative, with some possible modifications.

Immediately following the public EA meeting, local businesses along the corridor, including members of a local car dealer association, got together with local officials and the chamber of commerce to lobby TDOT to scrap the plan, which they believed would disrupt their business during and after construction. They hired their own engineers to design a five mile bypass around the existing corridor through undeveloped agricultural, residential, and at least one commercial property (a golf course) to the east.

This plan was presented to TDOT, who accepted it and began engineering work on a new design. A new Environmental Assessment was presented for comment at a public meeting on June 29, 2004. The only build alternatives presented were the new bypass option and "no-build." The original improvement option was not included as a build alternative. Public sentiment at that meeting and in subsequent correspondence indicated general public opposition.

Nothing happened for a while. Then in 2010, on belief that funding would be available in 2012 transportation budgets, local officials revived the plan. The FHWA required a new public meeting on the most recent 2004 EA because so much time had elapsed since the last hearing. The 2004 plan was presented essentially unchanged at a Nov. 9, 2010 meeting. There was considerable public opposition voiced at that meeting and in subsequent correspondence.

All of this is on the public record in the two TDOT Environmental Assessment reports. Local officials are moving ahead with some relatively minor changes to a couple of alignments. Local media is reporting it as a "done deal" and that ROW acquisition and construction will begin as soon as 2012.

We are writing to alert you that a modified Environmental Assessment for this project will soon be submitted for FHWA review and approval. Local officials and TDOT will be requesting a "finding of no significant impact" so they can fund the project and begin work.

Our concerns are:

- The EA for the original 2000 improvement, which utilized mostly existing right of way and alignments, found no significant environmental, social, cultural, business, or community impacts and little impact on local tax revenues. All state and federal regulatory agencies, local governments, and cultural alliances signed off on the overall plan, with some suggested changes.
- The alignment of the 2004 proposed bypass alternative, a new highway, would have a far more widespread impact. It would require acquisition of all new right of way, eliminate hundreds of acres of green space and agricultural land, introduce noise pollution to communities and a public park along the route, and will negatively impact the rural character of the community.
- Several of the car dealers and other businesses who objected to the original design are either out of business or have already relocated.
- The original 2000 design was not included as an alternative build option in the 2004 Environmental Assessment at either the 2004 or 2010 public hearings.
- The 2004/2010 proposed bypass is supposed to route through traffic around the existing corridor, but it has six large interchanges along its five mile route.
- The estimated cost of the bypass has grown to over \$130 million, more than twice the estimate for the original "fix in place" proposal (not allowing for inflation).
- The University of Tennessee will lose valuable agricultural research land, including 30 year projects that will have to be started over in a new location, if at all.
- It does not appear that affected communities and neighborhoods were fully involved in the local planning or decision to scrap the original plan and relocate the highway near their residences and a park. Local media reports suggest little or no public involvement in the chamber of commerce alternative design meetings and workshops.

Therefore, we request the FHWA to take the following actions:

1. Reject a "finding of no significant impact" and require a full Environmental Impact Statement for the 2004/2010 proposed bypass alternative.
2. Require the original 2000 "fix in place" improvement EA to be included in the final 2004/2010 bypass proposal EIS as an alternative build option for public comment.

3. Require a new public hearing on the combined 2000 EA and 2004/2010 proposal EIS.
4. Carefully review the EA/EIS reports and give full and equal consideration to public comments of all stakeholders, including the general public and residents of the affected communities, before making any final decision on a preferred build option.

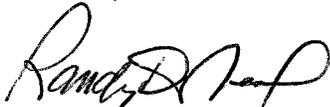
This is a dangerous three-mile stretch of highway that carries 50,000 plus vehicles per day on a four lane, grass median divided highway with no signal controls. In addition to motorists traveling through at interstate speeds exceeding the posted speed limit, safety is further compromised by more than 36 curb cut/entrances on the east side, 16 entrances on the west side, and 21 median cuts/crossings to accommodate uncontrolled commercial development that has occurred over the years.

Everyone agrees that something must be done about the problem. Differing opinions on the best solution, however, have delayed needed improvements. We would like to see it resolved in a way that reflects the wishes and concerns of the entire community, including the general public.

If you have any questions or comments we can be reached at the above address and phone number, or via email (preferred) at RNeal@rviews.com (Randy Neal) or MNeal@rviews.com (Michele Neal).

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,



Randy D. Neal



Michele N. Neal

CC:

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