

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This project involves proposed improvements to a segment of the National Highway System (NHS) corridor beginning at the junction of United States Highway 385 (US 385) and State Link 62A (L62A), and extending north approximately 26 miles to the City of Alliance, Nebraska. The existing roadway is a two-lane rural highway located within the Nebraska Panhandle, an elongated region extending west from the main portion of the state and made up of 11 rural and sparsely populated counties. This project is part of the Heartland Expressway, which is one of the routes that Congress designated as a High Priority Corridor, a roadway considered to be important to the nation's economy, defense, and mobility.

Purpose and Need. The purpose of the project is:

- To **provide an improved north-south highway on a NHS High Priority Corridor that increases the efficiency and safety of commerce and travel** as included in the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA).
- To **fulfill legislative intent** of the ISTEA; the Transportation Equity Act for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (TEA-21); the **Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU)**, which have provided federally “earmarked” funds for the development of the Heartland Expressway; and the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21), which continued authorization of funding as deemed necessary in SAFETEA-LU.
- To **fulfill legislative intent of the Build Nebraska Act**; the State has identified this project as one of the high priority projects to receive funding under this act.
- To **address roadway and operational deficiencies** along this segment of the Heartland Expressway corridor.

The need for the project, and the reason it is considered the next logical segment of the Heartland Expressway, is that (1) it has the highest traffic volumes, including high truck traffic; and (2) it traverses numerous short dunes requiring frequent climbs and turns resulting in several areas that do not meet AASHTO standards for speed limit and Nebraska Department of Roads (NDOR) standards for grade. The combination of traffic volumes and frequent climbs and turns results in decreased operational efficiency of this facility.

In addition to the above purposes, an additional goal for the project is:

- To **improve the highway infrastructure in order to facilitate economic development** by enhancing the efficiency and mobility of Nebraska Panhandle regional commerce for residents, businesses, visitors, and interstate travel.

Regional Connectivity. While the proposed improvements have benefits as a stand-alone project, the approximately 26-mile long route would have greater benefits once the entire Heartland Expressway is completed. Congress identified this High Priority Corridor in 1991 to extend from Denver through Scottsbluff to Rapid City. Since 1991, about 50 percent of the Heartland Expressway has undergone improvements. Currently, it is a four-lane divided highway from the City of Minatare west past Scottsbluff and south to Interstate 80 (I-80), and from the Nebraska–South Dakota state line north to Rapid City. This leaves a two-lane gap between the four-lane sections, extending from the Nebraska–South Dakota line south and west

to Minatare. Eventually, this gap is intended to be closed by constructing a four-lane expressway, which would provide a transportation network that connects not only the cities within the Heartland Expressway corridor, but others throughout the Great Plains. This segment would provide an expressway link for the City of Alliance to I-80, the largest freight transportation corridor in the United States, and to I-90 at Rapid City, South Dakota. According to local officials and business leaders, this connection is a vital link for all sectors of the regional economy of the Panhandle.

A new economic study conducted as part of the Heartland Expressway Corridor study shows that benefits of improvements to US 385 in Nebraska consisting of expansion to a four-lane facility would result in a benefit/cost ratio of 1.7; improving this part of the Heartland Expressway alone would result in a benefit/cost ratio or at least 1.2—indicating a positive impact on the regional economy. These types of improvements typically provide benefits that include travel time savings (which may occur as motorists experience reduced travel times), increased safety (which may occur as the number of accidents that take place on the corridor are reduced); and operating cost savings (that may occur as the distances driven by motorists are reduced), as well as economic development feasibility.

Interstate Connectivity. The Heartland Expressway is a federally designated trade corridor within the four states of Colorado, Nebraska, Wyoming, and South Dakota. It traverses some of the most agriculture- and energy-productive rural regions in the United States, and is a major route to popular tourist destinations such as the Rocky Mountains, Black Hills, Scottsbluff National Monument, and Fort Laramie.

International Connectivity. The Heartland Expressway is also the central portion of the Ports-to-Plains Corridor, an essential part of the necessary transportation infrastructure for movement of goods and products between Mexico, the United States, and Canada. In addition the project segment is part of NDOR's Priority Commercial System, a continuous network of routes within the state designed to carry higher traffic volumes, especially larger volumes of commercial vehicles.

Alternatives Analysis. Alternatives were developed and screened based on three levels of analysis.

- Facility Alternatives. While the language of the Congressional Earmark specifically states that the facility is an Expressway (defined as a divided, limited-access highway); other facility types were analyzed. The first level evaluated different roadway facilities based on their ability to meet the project purpose and need. Five facility types were evaluated, consisting of a Super 2 Highway, 2-Lane Highway with Climbing Lanes, 2-Lane Highway with Auxiliary Turning Lanes, 4-Lane Undivided Highway, and 4-Lane Divided Highway. Of these, the 4-Lane Divided Highway is the preferred alternative.
- Alignment Alternatives. The second level evaluated alignment alternatives based on engineering feasibility and constructability issues. Three alignment locations were evaluated for a 4-Lane Divided Highway, consisting of an East Offset, Centered, and West Offset alternative. Of these the West Offset is the preferred alternative. The existing US 385 lanes would be used for the northbound lanes, while constructing two new southbound lanes to the west. The existing US 385 lanes would be resurfaced as needed to extend the pavement life until such time they could no longer be resurfaced.

Once this occurs, the northbound lanes would be reconstructed at the 40-foot median width and match the elevation of the southbound lanes.

- Design Alternatives. The third level evaluated design alternatives at four specific locations along the alignment, consisting of the Junction of US 385 and L62A, at the unincorporated community of Angora, at the Dinklage Feedlot, and within the City of Alliance. Screening was based on public input, environmental impacts, and engineering considerations. The preferred design alternatives were the Large Sweeping Curve at the Junction; East Alternative at Angora, Shifted Alternative at the Dinklage Feedlot Shifted Alternative, and Five-Lane with Two-Way Left-Turn Lane in Alliance. These refinements for the spot locations will be incorporated into the West Offset alternative.

Interim Phasing. The first construction project would be within the City of Alliance. The second construction project would begin south of the Alliance improvements, this project includes an interim build phase that uses the existing US 385 lanes as the northbound lanes, while constructing two new southbound lanes to the west. This phase would extend to south of Angora to the existing junction of L62A. Once the improvements approach the junction, the depressed median would be tapered down to establish auxiliary turn lanes at the intersection. The outside southbound lane would transition into the existing free right, and the US 385 median would continue to taper down to zero south of the intersection. A dedicated left-turn lane would be formed at the junction for northbound left turns. The existing US 385 lanes would be resurfaced as needed to extend the pavement life until such time they could no longer be resurfaced. Once this occurs, the northbound lanes would be reconstructed at the 40-foot median width and match the elevation of the southbound lanes. The sweeping curve connection to L62A and realignment of US 385 would be constructed during the third construction project.

General Project Schedule and Anticipated Funding. The first construction project, Alliance South, DPS-385-4(139), CN 51522, programmed in the STIP for FY15, would construct US 385 from the junction of N-2 south to approximately MM 100+00. The project would use designated federal funds and is estimated at \$25 million for construction costs and construction engineering. The second construction project, L62A North, S-385-3(1021), CN 51443, programmed in the STIP for FY16, would construct US 385 from approximately MM 100+00 south to the junction of US 385 and L62A. This project would use Build Nebraska Act funds and is estimated at \$30 million for construction costs and construction engineering. The two projects above have operational independence and could be constructed in four construction seasons. The third construction project also has operational independence is currently not programmed because it is more than five years out. This phase, would construct the segment of highway connecting L62A to US 385, via the long sweeping curve. This project would also require reconstructing the south leg of US 385 to connect to the new sweeping curve. Preliminary engineering, ROW and utilities have or would occur under a separate project NH-385-3(118), CN 51432, and are estimated at \$10 million. NDOR is committed to constructing this segment in the future as funding becomes available; it will be considered in the next group of selections for the Build Nebraska Act. The total cost (in today's dollars) of the project contemplated is estimated at \$90 million, which includes an estimated \$25 million to construct the sweeping curve and reconstruct the northbound lanes.

Environmental Impacts Analysis. The analysis of impacts covered environmental, social and economic issues, including in-depth evaluation of those resources with greatest concerns. Special studies consisted of Section 106/Cultural Resource Review and Coordination, Paleontological Survey, Wetland Delineation and 404 Coordination, Endangered Species Review and Coordination, Farmland Conversion Impact Coordination, Noise Study, Hazardous Materials Technical Report, and Subsurface Investigation. Based on the analysis to-date, adverse impacts are considered minor and can be mitigated with proposed measures and conservation conditions.

Public Involvement/Project Coordination. Public involvement has consisted of:

- Site Visit and Local Officials Scoping Meeting on 10 January 2011
- Citizen Survey by Alliance Police Department to determine the types and frequency of near-miss incidents along the project length
- Public Information Meeting on 3 May 2011, including project notification information mailing to stakeholders, news release distributed through NDOR's normal media distribution, news story published in the Scottsbluff Star Herald on 16 April 2011, and signs placed at two locations along the corridor to inform drivers of the public meeting. Most of the comments received were supportive of the project. The local community considers the roadway to be in need of upgrading due to the presence of large trucks, and poor visibility due to the vertical curves.
- Agency Coordination with state and federal agencies, including coordination with US Army Corps of Engineers, US Fish & Wildlife Service, Nebraska Game & Parks Commission, Nebraska State Historic Preservation Office, and Tribal Historic Preservation Officers.

Conclusion. This Draft EA has been prepared in accordance with the regulations of CEQ (40 CFR 1500-1508), as well as FHWA's implementing regulations (23 CFR 771.119 and 23 CFR 771.135). The proposed alternative is to construct a 4-lane divided highway offset to the west of the existing alignment, including context sensitive designs at spot locations. Based on this assessment, the proposed alternative would satisfy the purpose and need.

After reviewing and studying this Draft EA, FHWA has determined that the document adequately and accurately discusses the environmental issues and impacts of the proposed project. Based on the analysis to-date, adverse impacts are considered minor and can be mitigated. To comply with all applicable Federal, State and local legislation, as well as any general or special conditions required by pending permits, the mitigation measures/environmental commitments have been incorporated into the Preferred Alternative. These commitments would be implemented during the appropriate project phase.

Next Steps. A Public Hearing for the project has been scheduled for 1 October 2014, 5:00–7:00 pm MST, at Newberry's, 110 W 4th Street, Alliance, NE 69301. The format of the public hearing would consist of an Open House from 5:00–6:30 pm, and a Public Forum from 6:30–7:00 pm.

Design information would be displayed and personnel from NDOR would be present to answer questions and receive comments about the project. This hearing would be held for coordination and fact-gathering on the NEPA document, as well as to provide and receive information

regarding environmental impacts. The project study team would be present to receive design input regarding the project. There would be a 30-day comment period for the Draft EA.

Following agency and public review and comment on the Draft EA, FHWA would determine whether the project can be carried forward with a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), or if an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is required.