



Response to Public Comments

DATE: December 5, 2023
BY: City of Decatur
PROJECT: Tennessee River Bridge Feasibility Study

A public involvement meeting was held August 31, 2023, for the Tennessee River Bridge Feasibility Study (Study) project to gather input and feedback on the proposed alignments presented for the proposed project and evaluation criteria for all alternatives. The meeting was an open house meeting and took place at Ingall's Harbor Pavilion. Public comments were collected during the meeting via comment cards and a court reporter. Comments were also received via email until October 1, 2023. The City of Decatur (City) received 149 comments via comment card, court reporter, or email. Two form letters were received resulting in an additional 205 submissions. The comments were grouped and addressed by content. This document provides a response to each comment grouping.

Comment Grouping No. 1: Comments were received expressing concern about the impact of this project to Historical Resources, Archaeological Resources, Cultural Resources, and Environmental Justice Areas located within the Study Area. Specific resources such as cemeteries and Indian burial grounds were included in the comments as concerns.

Response Grouping No. 1: *The City is using a combination of local funds and federal grant funds to conduct the Study. The City anticipates the financing for the future design and construction of the project to include federal funding. The Study follows the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Furthermore, Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA) requires Federal agencies to take into account the effects of their undertakings on historic properties. Compliance with NEPA is required for all federal actions, including financial support of a project. Compliance with NEPA requires the team to avoid and minimize negative impacts to environmental resources. Where adverse impacts are required, mitigation may be needed to offset the impact. Federal and state regulatory agencies have oversight for all cultural resources and will determine if the project is in compliance with NEPA and the NHPA.*

Comment Grouping No. 2: Comments were received expressing concerns about the project impacting property. This is referred to as Right-of-Way (ROW) Impacts. Specific ROW Impacts mentioned in the comments received included impacts to personal property, impacts to farmland, and a private well (irrigation).



Response Grouping No. 2: *The Study will determine the feasibility of alternatives to address the need for additional capacity crossing the river. There has been no alternative selected at this phase of the project. ROW impacts have not been identified at this time but there will be impacts to property by any alternative.*

ROW impacts identified in future phases of the project will follow the law with regards to acquisition and relocation services. Because this project will likely involve federal funding The Uniform Act is the primary law for ROW related acquisition and relocation activities.

Comment Grouping No. 3: Comments were received expressing concern about the impact of this project to Swan Creek and Mallard Fox Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) located within the Study Area. Comments about specific impacts within the WMAs included:

- Wetlands
- Recreation
- Protected species
- Migrating waterfowl
- Wildlife, duck, and fish habitat
- Shooting Range
- Endangered Species/Migratory birds
 - Bald Eagles
 - Pygmy Sunfish and habitat
 - Whooping Cranes
 - Sandhill Cranes
 - Snail Darters

Response Grouping No. 3: *The City is using a combination of local funds and federal grant funds to conduct the Study. The City anticipates the financing for the future design and construction of the project to include federal funding. The Study follows the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Compliance with NEPA is required for all federal actions, including financial support of a project. Compliance with NEPA requires the team to avoid and minimize negative impacts to environmental resources. Where adverse impacts are required, mitigation may be needed to offset the impact. Federal and state regulatory agencies have oversight for all cultural resources and will determine if the project is in compliance with NEPA.*

In response to the public concern about the shooting range, the consultant team will also include the effects each alternative would have on this facility to continue to operate because of the project. This analysis will be presented to the public at the public involvement meetings during future phases of the project. A team of experts will be available at those meetings to explain the findings as well as gather additional feedback from the public about the alignments.



Comment Grouping No. 4: Comments were received expressing concern about the potential impact of this project to Swan Creek and Mallard Fox WMAs located within the Tennessee River Bridge Feasibility Study Area. Comments about specific impacts within the WMAs to duck hunting included:

- Ducks Unlimited - \$10 million donation for habitat construction 2 years ago
- Public Hunting
- Lost memories
- Waterfowl hunting
- Dewatering unit
- Public Land
- Local revenue (i.e., hunting permits and purchases associated with hunting (gas, food, accommodations))
- Duck flyway
- Mitigation efforts for loss of public hunting land
- Duck and waterfowl populations are on the decline
- River is dangerous for duck hunters and swan creek offers refuge

Response Grouping No. 4: *The City is using a combination of local funds and federal grant funds to conduct the Study. The City anticipates the financing for the future design and construction of the project to include federal funding. The Study follows the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Compliance with NEPA is required for all federal actions, including financial support of a project. Compliance with NEPA requires the team to avoid and minimize negative impacts to environmental resources. Where adverse impacts are required, mitigation may be needed to offset the impact. Federal and state regulatory agencies have oversight for all cultural resources and will determine if the project is in compliance with NEPA.*

In response to the public concern about the impact of the alignments on the area of the WMAs used for duck hunting, the consultant team recommends any future phase of the project specifically evaluate the effects an alternative would have with regards to duck hunting and the dewatering unit. The project team has initiated stakeholder meetings with the duck hunting community to better understand the impacts of each alignment and determine if this can be avoided, minimized, or mitigated. The project team recommends the inclusion of this interest group in future phases of the project.

Comment Grouping No. 5: Comments were received expressing concern about Public Meeting Notices, Comment Periods, Fact Sheets, and Agency Coordination for the Study. Below is a list of specific concerns expressed about the project meetings:

- Decatur didn't advertise until the day before
- Received no notification of the first public meeting
- Wanted a formal presentation
- Open question and answer session with verbal questions and responses



- City of Decatur did not publicize on their website
- Consult more federal agencies
- Pros and Cons of each option
- No knowledge of initial meeting
- Wants the other meetings (not Public Involvement Meetings) to be published for interested parties
- Extended comment period

Response Grouping No. 5: *The City is using a combination of local funds and federal grant funds to conduct the Study. The City anticipates the financing for the future design and construction of the project to include federal funding. The Study follows the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Transparency and all other requirements of the project's meetings must follow the federal guidelines established for transportation projects using federal funding. Below are the details regarding the transparency and advertising of the project:*

- *Public Involvement Meeting #1 – Tuesday, May 2, 2023*
 - *Advertised in the Decatur Daily on April 4, 5, 7, 8, 11, 12, 14, 15, 18, 19, 21, 22, 25, 26, 28, 29, and May 2, 2023*
 - *Posted on the City's Facebook page and Website on April 4, 2023*
- *Public Involvement Meeting #2 – Thursday, August 31, 2023*
 - *Advertised in the Decatur Daily on July 29, August 1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 9, 11, 12, 15, 16, 18, 19, 22, 23, 25, 26, 29, and 30, 2023*
 - *Posted on the City's Facebook page and Website on August 1, 2023*

Comment Grouping No. 6: Comments were received expressing concern about environmental impacts from alternative corridor alignments during and after construction for the Study.

- Hazardous materials being mishandled during construction
- Noise pollution
- Trash pollution from roadway

Response Grouping No. 6: *The City is using a combination of local funds and federal grant funds to conduct the Study. The City anticipates the financing for the future design and construction of the project to include federal funding. The Study follows the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Should the project move forward through design and construction, all federal, state, and local regulations regarding construction will be followed.*

Comment Grouping No. 7: Comments were received expressing concern about future regional connectivity of the Study Area to Huntsville MPO, Limestone, and Lawrence counties and beyond.



Response Grouping No. 7: *The City is using a combination of local funds and federal grant funds to conduct the Study. The City anticipates the financing for the future design and construction of the project to include federal funding. The Study follows the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Huntsville MPO, Limestone and Athens counties and many other surrounding communities were included in all stakeholder group engagements. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) is the lead federal agency for this project and requires all regional projects such as the Study to coordinate with all local, state, and federal transportation plans.*

Comment Grouping No. 8: Comments were received expressing concern about the Study's consideration of future traffic growth and the long-term viability of the transportation improvements.

Response Grouping No. 8: *Transportation projects use projected traffic volumes based on projected growth for the basis of any design decisions. For this project, the design team projected the traffic volumes using acceptable professional methods to an assumed design year of 2050. As the project moves into future phases of planning and study this assumed design year will be changed and updated as needed.*

Comment Grouping No. 9: Comments were received expressing concern about the location of a new interchange on I-65 north of the I-65 at I-565 interchange for the Study.

Response Grouping No. 9: *Each alternative was studied by the consultant team and the results of that analysis were presented to the public at the public involvement meeting held for this project in August. Several of the alternatives determined to be feasible, and included in the project, depicted a new interchange connection with I-65 approximately two miles north of the existing I-65 at I-565 interchange. As this project moves forward into future phases the location of any new interchange will require further study and collaboration with neighboring communities, Alabama Department of Transportation and FHWA. At this phase of the project the project team has determined that a new interchange is feasible and addresses congestion, but the location of the interchange warrants further study and coordination with regional partners.*

We appreciate your feedback from our second public meeting held for the Study project. Your participation and individual comments are a very important part of this study. The chart below depicts the entire Feasibility Study Process:

For current project information please visit the city's website:

<https://www.cityofdecatur.com/departments/metropolitan-planning-organization/>