Caltrans Route 46E Corridor Study: Facilitated Strategy Session

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Study Team Meeting Summary

Prepared by:

Moore Iacofano Goltsman, Inc
800 Hearst Street
Berkeley, CA 94710

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Introduction

On May 22, 2007 over 20 representatives from Caltrans District 5, Caltrans Headquarters, the City of Paso Robles, San Luis Obispo County and the San Luis Obispo Council of Governments gathered to discuss Caltrans Highway 46E in a strategy session facilitated by Carolyn Verheyen of MIG. The meeting marked the beginning of a renewed commitment to complete a Corridor Study to chart a course for highway improvements over the next 20-30 years. The passage of Proposition 1B in November 2006 has created new transportation infrastructure funding opportunities previously unavailable and renewed interest in moving the study forward. The morning meeting was comprised of a discussion about project goals, stakeholder issues and next steps and concluded with agreement from all stakeholders to meet again on June 28 to consider background information and finalize a strategic path for completion of the corridor study.

Aileen Loe opened the meeting, giving a welcome and brief overview, and participants introduced themselves in turn. Carolyn reviewed the agenda and emphasized the need to build on all prior efforts, but with openness to new discussions, information, public engagement and win-win solutions.

Project Goal Development

During the first half of the meeting, Carolyn asked people to share their goals for the Corridor and goals for the study itself.

Goals for the corridor in the future included:

- ✓ Separating local, regional and interregional traffic
- ✓ Ensuring goods movement
- ✓ Fostering connectivity to, across and along 46E
- ✓ Increasing safety and efficiency
- ✓ Providing a decent level of service
- ✓ Promoting multi-modal movement
- ✓ Enhancing community cohesion, character and quality of life

Goals specific to the study included:

- ✓ Ensuring coordination with existing planning processes and current projects
- ✓ Providing guidance for near-term decisions
- ✓ Developing sustainable agreements over time
- ✓ Ensuring flexibility
- ✓ Creating a fundable, feasible and phaseable project for the short, medium and long term
- ✓ Ensuring environmental enhancement, preservation and stewardship
- ✓ Gaining stakeholder acceptance
- ✓ Developing a well-designed solution

Issues Discussion

The second half of the meeting focused on a discussion of stakeholder issues and the identification of specific next steps to move the project forward.

Primary issues identified included:

Need for greater clarity

While there is no lack of historical information about the corridor, there is currently a lack of clarity on the part of all the stakeholders about a number of key issues. There were repeated calls for moving towards greater clarity, agreement, or reconciliation on a number of issues including:

- **Next steps in the technical planning process**
  All stakeholders would like to see the study report and corridor improvements move forward but there is a lack of understanding about what the steps are for doing so.

- **Traffic baseline and projection data**
  Stakeholders have not agreed to a common data baseline.

- **LOS definition**
  Caltrans and the City of Paso Robles disagree on the desired level of service for Highway 46E and define LOS differently.

- **Roadway designation and definitions**
  SLOCOG expressed a desire for an interim 6-lane expressway while other stakeholders expressed desire for a freeway, allowing for a freeway-to-freeway interchange at Highway 101. There was an interest in clarifying the flexibility of roadway definitions as these definitions often determine the types of improvements that can be made and funding availability. Based on the goals developed earlier in the meeting, it was clear that there was some consensus about the desired future for the corridor and a desire for innovative solutions. Greater clarity on the flexibility of roadway designations and definitions will assist this process.

Timing

While all stakeholders agree that a study must be completed and improvements planned for the corridor, some would like to strive for an earlier completion date than July 2009.

Funding

Both the availability of and responsibility for funding improvements were identified as key issues that must be resolved before the study is completed. The City of Paso Robles is reluctant to collect fees from developers for highway 46E improvements until the future of the project is clear and the solution is realistic in cost and timeframe.

Need for near-term improvements but within a long-term plan

The well-documented congestion challenges facing Highway 46 impact drivers of all types. The group discussed problems related to congestion at a specific and corridor level, including specific intersections and the broader impact of highway improvements on local businesses and the importance of maintaining access to Cuesta College. Caltrans also

expressed its goal of safeguarding current and future investments, and not precluding the optimal long-term solution, to be determined.

Highway 101 and the Highway 46E interchange

The capacity of Highway 101 is a limiting factor to the future of the corridor. The current interchange between Highway 101 and Highway 46E will not be able to accommodate projected traffic increases in the future and will need to be improved in some manner. The type and size of interchange was noted several times as a key to the process.

Next Steps

Carolyn worked with the group to identify the next steps, as indicated below. Caltrans District 5 staff will develop a proposed technical workplan and schedule to present to the group at the next meeting.

June 28 Meeting of the Study Team:

- Agree on Goals and Issues
- Agree on technical workplan/schedule, and the timing of the Stakeholder Engagement Process
- Review compiled background materials including:
    - ✓ Traffic data (refer to TAC to discuss)
    - ✓ Funding responsibilities
    - ✓ Definitions of expressway and freeway
    - ✓ Existing projects and those in the pipeline
    - ✓ Overview of alternatives as preparation for next meeting

TAC Meeting to prepare for July Study Team Meeting

July Meeting of the Study Team:

- Discuss and Refine Alternatives
- Develop Alternative Evaluation Criteria (possibly)
- Agree on Stakeholder/Public Engagement Process

Working with Caltrans, MIG will develop the agenda for the June 28 meeting and design a series of future meetings to continue the corridor study. MIG will also develop a stakeholder engagement plan and schedule.