

PROJECT I.D. 1646-07-01
UNITED STATES HIGHWAY (USH) 14/61
(WESTBY TO VIROQUA)
VERNON COUNTY, WISCONSIN

FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

And Section 4(f) Evaluation

Submitted Pursuant to 42 U.S.C. 4332 (2)(c) and 49 U.S.C. 303
U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration
and
State of Wisconsin Department of Transportation

APPROVALS

Date For Federal Highway Administration

Date For Wisconsin Department of Transportation

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ABSTRACT

Highway 14/61 is a major regional highway serving Vernon County, and providing links to communities in southwestern Wisconsin. Within the study area, USH 14/61 passes through the Cities of Viroqua and Westby. Travel efficiency and safety are affected by high traffic volumes in Viroqua, heavy truck traffic in Viroqua and Westby, numerous driveways and local road intersections, an incompatible mix of through and local traffic, and insufficient roadway capacity. A range of alternatives was considered in the Draft EIS to improve traffic flow and safety, reduce the effects of truck traffic in Viroqua and Westby, and to provide a long-term transportation solution that can be incorporated into future community land use and transportation plans. The Draft EIS evaluated the social, environmental, and economic impacts of the No Action Alternative and a range of Build Alternatives, including highway bypasses at Viroqua and Westby. The recommended alternative presented in this Final EIS includes bypasses of Westby and Viroqua and expanding Highway 14/61 between the two communities. Primary impacts of the recommended alternative include farmland acquisition and severances and residential and business displacements. The recommended alternative was selected based on review of impacts presented in the Draft EIS and comments received as a result of the public hearing and availability of the Draft EIS for agency and public review.

National Environmental Policy Act Statement

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), 42 USC 4321-4347, became effective January 1, 1970. This law requires that all federal agencies have a detailed Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) prepared for every recommendation or report on proposals for legislation or other major federal action that will significantly affect the quality of the human environment. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) is therefore required to have an EIS prepared for proposals funded under its authority if the proposals are determined to be for major actions that will significantly affect the quality of the human environment.

The processing of an EIS is carried out in two stages. The Draft EIS is forwarded for review and comment to federal, state, and local agencies with jurisdiction by law or special expertise and made available to the public. Public availability must occur at least 15 days before the public hearing, and no later than the time of the first public hearing notice or notice of opportunity for a hearing. Normally, 45 days plus mailing time will be allowed for comments to be made on the Draft EIS unless a time extension is granted by the Director of the Bureau of Environment. After this period has elapsed, preparation can begin on the Final EIS.

The Final EIS is prepared to reflect the following:

1. Basic content of the Draft EIS as amended, internal agency comments, editing, additional alternatives being considered, and changes due to the time lag between production of the Draft and Final EIS
2. Summary of public hearing comments
3. Summary of comments received on the Draft EIS
4. Evaluation and disposition of substantive comments

A Record of Decision cannot be completed and signed sooner than 90 days after circulation of the Draft EIS to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) or 30 days after submittal of the Final EIS to the USEPA.

Both the Draft and Final EIS are full-disclosure documents that provide full descriptions of the proposed project and the existing environment, as well as an analysis of the anticipated beneficial or adverse environmental effects.

Summary

Information About Final EIS

This Final EIS includes information presented in the Draft EIS, which was approved by the Federal Highway Administration on February 1, 2000 for distribution to agencies and the public. The Final EIS also responds to comments on the Draft EIS, summarizes input received as a result of the public hearing and availability of the Draft EIS for review, and identifies the recommended alternative and the basis for its selection. Following is a list of format changes between the Draft and Final EIS, and revisions or additions based on Draft EIS comments and/or public hearing input. New material in the Final EIS is highlighted either with shading or with a vertical line (sidebar) in the right margin.

- **Summary** – Discussion on Recommended Alternative added (see page VI).
- **Section 1 – Purpose and Need for Proposed Action.** Clarification to “capacity” discussion provided per revised WisDOT LOS criteria.
- **Section 2 – Alternatives/Recommended Alternative.** Previously titled “Alternatives” in Draft EIS. Discussion on “Identification of Recommended Alternative” and “Basis for Selecting the Recommended Alternative” added.
- **Section 3 – Affected Environment.** Minor editorial changes provided under “Environmental and Related Resources” and updated information provided under “Cultural Resources.”
- **Section 4 – Environmental Consequences.** “Measures to Minimize Adverse Effects of Build Alternatives” discussion in Draft EIS moved to new Final EIS Section VI – Commitment to Impact Mitigation. Discussion on “Cultural Resources Impacts” updated.
- **Section 5 – Commitment to Impact Mitigation.** New Final EIS section. Incorporates “Measures to Minimize Adverse Effects of Build Alternatives” discussion from Draft EIS Section IV.
- **Section 6 – Wetlands, Only Practicable Alternative Finding.** New Final EIS section.
- **Section 7 – Comments and Coordination.** Previously Draft EIS Section 5. This section is divided into two major subsections, Comments and Coordination during Draft EIS Preparation (which repeats information from the Draft EIS) and Comments and Coordination Following Draft EIS Availability (new Final EIS information).
- **Appendix C – Agency Correspondence during Draft EIS Activities.** Previously titled “Agency Correspondence” in Draft EIS.
- **Appendix D – Agency Comments on Draft EIS.** Includes agency letters and comment responses.

Location

The U.S. Highway (USH) 14/61 project is located in Vernon County in southwestern Wisconsin (see location map). The USH 14/61 corridor through the study area extends from the State Trunk Highway (STH) 27/82 intersection with USH 14/61 south of Viroqua to County Trunk Highway (CTH) GG west of Westby, a distance of 27 kilometers (17 miles).

Proposed Action

The proposed action is to provide a safe and efficient transportation link in the Vernon County region and between the Cities of Viroqua and Westby.

USH 14/61 is a major link in the regional highway network serving southwestern Wisconsin. It is a Principal Arterial Highway, National Highway System (NHS) route, and “Connector” highway under WisDOT’s Corridors 2020 Plan. It is also designated as a federal/state “long truck route” allowing trucks up to 19.5 meters (65 feet) in length to use the highway. All of these designations indicate the importance of USH 14/61 in providing a high level of through traffic mobility, as well as providing reasonable access to businesses and other resources in the region.

Current average annual daily traffic in downtown Viroqua is 11,300 and is expected to reach 21,200 in Design Year 2025 (88 percent increase). Traffic on USH 14/61 between Viroqua and Westby is 10,900 and is expected to reach 15,800 in 2025 (45 percent increase). Traffic in downtown Westby is 8,900 and is expected to reach 12,400 in 2025 (39 percent increase). Under present peak traffic volumes, all segments within the USH 14/61 study area are over design capacity, and four segments are approaching or at maximum capacity (see page 1-8 for more information). Under 2025 peak traffic volumes, all segments will be at or approaching maximum capacity.

A substantial amount of heavy truck traffic travels through downtown Viroqua and Westby. The average number of through trucks per day in Viroqua is 455, and is expected to reach 750 per day in 2025. The average number of through trucks in Westby is 623, and is expected to reach 750 per day in 2025.

Five locations along USH 14/61 exceed statewide average crash rates (see page 1-5). As traffic volumes increase, the number and severity of crashes, particularly at intersections, can also be expected to increase.

The purpose of the proposed transportation improvements includes the following regional and local objectives:

- Address future traffic demand and growth in the region, and improve local and through traffic access to regional destinations and community resources.
- Improve operational efficiency commensurate with the designation of USH 14/61 as a Principal Arterial, Corridors 2020 Connector, National Highway System route, and federal/state long truck route.
- Improve safety of the traveling public by increasing traffic capacity, reducing congestion, and minimizing conflicts between local and through traffic.

- Address congestion and safety concerns in Viroqua and Westby by reducing the amount of traffic and heavy trucks that travel through these communities, and enhance local efforts to revitalize their downtowns.
- Provide transportation improvements that will serve as a blueprint to assist local communities in future growth and development decisions, and corridor preservation.

The need for the proposed transportation improvements is based on a combination of factors related to:

- Existing and future traffic
- Safety
- System linkage and route importance
- Existing highway characteristics
- Local issues

These factors are discussed in detail in Section 1.

The *Westby-Viroqua Bypass Corridor Study* is a follow up to an earlier planning study conducted by WisDOT, the Cities of Viroqua and Westby, and Vernon County (*Transportation Study for USH 14 Westby/Viroqua*, Gremmer et al. 1996). The objectives of the earlier planning study, referred to as the *1996 Study*, were to:

- Evaluate long-term improvements, including Viroqua and Westby bypasses
- Develop short-term improvements on USH 14/61 (Main Street) in Viroqua
- Develop a future transportation plan that brings together regional and local interests

To implement these objectives, the *1996 Study* recommended that Main Street in Viroqua be reconstructed in the short term, and that bypasses around Viroqua and Westby be pursued through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process that includes detailed evaluation of alternatives and their impacts, and preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The short-term improvements in Viroqua (Main Street reconstruction) were completed in fall 1999. The present *Westby-Viroqua Bypass Corridor Study* fulfills the recommendation to pursue a bypass of Viroqua and Westby through the NEPA process.

Time Frame for Proposed Action

The *Westby-Viroqua Bypass Corridor Study*, including the Record of Decision, is scheduled to be completed in 2002. Construction could occur in 2010 or beyond. Real estate acquisition may begin 3 years prior to construction startup.

Alternatives

The No Action Alternative, as defined below, serves as the baseline for comparison to the Build Alternatives. An initial range of Build Alternatives was developed during the *1996 Study*. The initial range was screened and refined during data gathering, public involvement, and agency coordination activities for the *Westby-Viroqua Bypass Corridor Study*. Detailed information on the alternatives screening process and the reasonable range of Build Alternatives is presented in Section 2.

No Action Alternative

Under this alternative, no highway capacity improvements would be made. No improvements other than normal pavement and structure maintenance, spot traffic operational improvements, and minor safety improvements would be made to the existing highway. The effects of future traffic increases would be borne by the existing highway with consequential effects on congestion, mobility, operational characteristics, and safety.

Reasonable Build Alternatives

The reasonable Build Alternatives consist of constructing a controlled access highway around Viroqua and Westby on a new alignment. The alternatives are illustrated on Exhibit 2-4, and described in detail in Section 2 under “Alternatives Retained for Detailed Study”. The reasonable Build Alternatives are summarized as follows:

- A bypass west of Viroqua and west of Westby would be comprised of Alternatives S-1, C-5, the common C-4/C-5 alignment along USH 14/61 between Viroqua and Westby, and either Alternative N-3, N-4, or N-7.
- A bypass east of Viroqua and west of Westby would be comprised of Alternatives S-2, C-4, the common C-4/C-5 alignment along USH 14/61 between Viroqua and Westby, and either Alternative N-3, N-4, or N-7.

Bypass segments on new location would be 2-lane rural roadways and would have controlled access to regulate the number and spacing of access points, preserve traffic carrying capacity, and enhance safety. Reasonable access including side roads, driveways, and farm crossings would be provided where appropriate. The part of USH 14/61 between Viroqua and Westby that would be incorporated into Alternatives C-4 and C-5 would be a 4-lane divided rural roadway. Where possible, the roadway would serve as 2 lanes of the future 4-lane facility.

Recommended Alternative

The east Viroqua bypass (Alternatives S-2 and C-4), Alternative N-4 (Westby bypass), and widening USH 14/61 to a four-lane divided highway between the communities have been selected as the recommended alternative to address USH 14/61 deficiencies. The recommended alternative provides the best long-term transportation service for Westby and Viroqua and the greater project area while minimizing social, economic, and natural resource impacts. The east Viroqua bypass (Alternatives S-2 and C-4) and Alternative N-4 (Westby bypass) also received the most support as a result of the public hearing, and were not opposed by state and federal review agencies.

Based on expected traffic volumes in 2025, the bypasses will be constructed as 2-lane roadways. As noted, USH 14/61 will be a 4-lane divided roadway between Westby and Viroqua.

Environmental Impacts

Primary impacts associated with the Build Alternatives and the recommended alternative include farmland impacts, residential and business relocations, wetland impacts, floodplain impacts, upland wildlife habitat impacts, and new stream crossings. The Impact Summary (Table S-1) lists the primary impact categories. These and other natural resource and socioeconomic impacts are discussed in detail in Section 4.

Lead Agency

The lead agency for this EIS is the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) in consultation with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT).

Other Activities Required

Prior to construction, authorization for discharge of fill materials into waters of the United States, including wetlands, will be required from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act. Authorization from the Corps is contingent on water quality certification from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources under Section 401 of the Clean Water Act, and Wisconsin Administrative Code Chapter NR 299.

Property acquisition and residential or business relocations will be in accordance with the Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act of 1970 (as amended). A Relocation Assistance Plan under Section 33.25, Wisconsin Statutes, will be required for displaced residences and businesses, and will be subject to approval by the Wisconsin Department of Commerce.

The recommended alternative will require a change in the official location of USH 14/61 under Section 84, Wisconsin Statutes. In addition, jurisdictional transfer of parts of existing USH 14/61 that would no longer be components of the State Trunk Highway System may be applicable. Agreements between WisDOT and local municipalities regarding jurisdictional transfer will be developed during the project's engineering phase.

Regulatory Compliance

Planning, agency coordination, public involvement, and impact evaluation for this study have been conducted in accordance with the National and Wisconsin Environmental Policy Acts; the Clean Water Act; the Clean Air Act; Executive Orders on wetland and floodplain protection, and environmental justice; the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act; the Endangered Species Act; the National Historic Preservation Act; and other federal and state laws, policies, and procedures for environmental impact analysis and preparation of environmental documents.

This document is in compliance with U.S. Department of Transportation and FHWA policies to determine whether a proposed project will have disproportionate impacts on minority or low-income populations. It meets the requirements of the *Presidential Executive Order on Environmental Justice 12898 – Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority and Low-Income Populations*. As demonstrated later in this EIS, neither minority nor low-income populations would receive disproportionately high and adverse impacts under the recommended alternative.