

METRO-MOBILITY TALKS

Harbor Bridge Project is Back On Track

Construction On A New Structure Can Begin As Early As 2015

Discussions on whether to replace the Harbor Bridge and, if so, the best option for doing that are once again on track after various issues sidelined the project for several years. The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) has held two public meetings since August to solicit feedback from the general public on whether and how to replace the 52-year-old bridge.

The Harbor Bridge Project will extend from the intersection of Beach Avenue and US 181 north of the Harbor Bridge to the intersection of Morgan Avenue and SH 286 south of the bridge. The project will take several years to complete with construction estimated to start as early as 2015 and as late as 2020.

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) is the lead federal agency for the project and TxDOT is the joint lead agency. Victor E. Vourcos, TxDOT project manager, said the federal government understands the need for a new bridge and can provide approximately \$400 million to build a new one, leaving a shortfall of at least \$200 million – and probably more – that must be provided by state, county, and local sources.

Funding the gap between what the FHWA will provide and the total construction cost is the biggest obstacle to completing the Harbor Bridge Project, Vourcos said. TxDOT cannot provide all of the additional funding, which means Nueces County, the City of Corpus Christi, the Corpus Christi Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), the Port of Corpus Christi and private industry must provide the balance.

Tom Niskala, transportation planning director, said it's difficult to determine an accurate price tag for the project until a preferred route is chosen and a financial plan is developed. He said that identifying sources for the replacement of the bridge will require a cooperative partnership between local, state and federal resource agencies.

Public involvement in the process will be given top priority, Vourcos said. The two public meetings held in 2011 resulted in two additional options to those originally proposed in a 2003 feasibility study. The study proposed four possible routes in addition to a "No-Build" alternative that would leave the existing bridge in place. One of the four options would direct the bridge over Corpus Christi Bay between Corpus Christi Beach and IH-37, while the other options would direct the bridge over land in the Port of Corpus Christi area. The project map is available on the www.ccharborbridgeproject.com website.

Two New Options

The two options proposed by the public were to replace the bridge with a tunnel or to direct the bridge farther west, Vourcos said, although a specific route was not suggested. With that in mind, TxDOT planners developed an option that would direct US 181 west from the Beach Avenue area to Nueces Bay Boulevard and tie into IH-37.

Now that six options have been identified (in addition to the No-Build option), the next step is to analyze the viability of each, including the impact each would have on the environment, Vourcos said. An Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is required by the National Environmental Policy Act for large construction projects that use federal highway funds. The document must be approved by the FHWA before right-of-way acquisition and construction can begin.

The Need

Transportation experts say a new Harbor Bridge is needed for the following reasons:

- **Safety:** The existing bridge lacks shoulders, curves in the roadway are too sharp, the vertical grade is too steep, and exit and entrance ramps are not up to current design standards.
- **Economic Development:** The Harbor Bridge is an important link to potential port development. The current distance between the bottom of the bridge and the water is 138 feet, well short of the 205 feet needed to accommodate modern container ships and cruise ships. Increasing the opening vertically and horizontally will allow more ships to enter the port.
- **Better Access:** Streets leading to and from the bridge do not connect well. Improving intermodal transportation by enhancing highways, port access, and pedestrian and bicycle modes will facilitate movement of people and goods.

- **Maintenance Costs:** The existing bridge is made of steel and extends over saltwater, resulting in rust and other damage. The state has spent approximately \$50 million in the past five to ten years to maintain the bridge and is facing the prospect of spending a larger sum on maintenance in the next 10 to 20 years.

Other reasons for building a new Harbor Bridge are to provide adequate capacity to meet future traffic demands and volumes and to provide a safe alternative hurricane evacuation route for the Corpus Christi area.

In June and July, respectively, TxDOT published a Notice of Intent in the Federal Register and the Texas Register announcing that the EIS process had begun for the Harbor Bridge Project. Public input is a key component in the EIS process, which consists of six phases:

1. Scoping (identification of issues to be studied)
2. Screening potential alternatives
3. Analyzing and evaluating a short list of alternatives in detail
4. Comparing alternatives and preparing the draft EIS by comparing the impact of each alternative on the environment
5. Distributing the draft EIS to federal, state, and local agencies, and interested members of the public
6. Responding to comments, revising, and preparing the final EIS that will identify the preferred alternative.

Environmental considerations include wetlands, noise, air, hazardous materials and environmental justice. Environmental justice is defined by the Environmental Protection Agency as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.”

Community Involvement

Upcoming steps in project development include initiating a Citizen Advisory Committee and a Technical Advisory Committee. The Citizens Advisory Committee will consist primarily of local residents and businesses in the project area, while the Technical advisory Committee will consist of local elected officials, representatives of civic organizations, and others. The Citizens Advisory Committee will receive information from TxDOT on progress of the project, promote public awareness and understanding of the project, and advise TxDOT on community ideas regarding the project as well as how best to communicate with the community.

To become or stay involved in the Harbor Bridge project, do one or more of the following:

- Follow the project online at www.ccharborbridgeproject.com and www.corpuschristi-mpo.org.
- Read the CCMPO and the TxDOT newsletter posted on these sites.
- Sign up to be on the CCMPO and TxDOT mailing lists.
- Attend public meetings and public hearings posted online.

For more information, contact: TxDOT project manager Victor E. Vourcos, P.E. at (361) 808-2378 or TxDOT's public information officer Tom Tagliabue at 361-808-2481.

If you have any questions regarding this or other Metro-Mobility Talks articles please contact us at ccmpo@cctxmpo.us or visit our website at www.corpuschristi-mpo.org