

Executive Summary

A North Douglas Crossing of Gastineau Channel is one of the City and Borough of Juneau (CBJ) Assembly's top transportation priorities. Project objectives are to improve transportation access and efficiency between the Juneau mainland and Douglas Island, provide a second access route for emergency response, and enhance access to the designated New Growth Area on West Douglas Island.

Identifying Juneau's preferred location for the North Douglas Crossing will provide impetus and focus to move this important transportation project forward. Based on the results of earlier studies, the CBJ is now focusing on alternative crossing locations in the Vanderbilt Hill Road, Sunny Point and Yandukin Drive areas of Egan Drive, crossing to North Douglas Highway.

This report provides the results of a public involvement process initiated by the CBJ to determine which crossing location is preferred by the community. Based on the results of the public process and evaluation of available technical information, it recommends that a crossing area at Vanderbilt Hill Road be identified as the community's preferred location for the North Douglas Crossing.

Public Involvement Process

In November 2006, the CBJ invited the Juneau public and stakeholders most affected by the crossing project to become more informed about each of the alternatives, and to share their ideas, concerns and preferences with the city. The CBJ tasked a project team led by Sheinberg Associates, with R&M Engineering, PND Engineering and McDowell Group, with the following:

- Facilitate and document comments about the crossing alternatives, based on existing technical information;
- Conduct a community opinion survey;
- Complete additional engineering, limited to refining the alternative alignments and updating estimated project costs; and
- Report to the Assembly with the results of the public involvement program and a recommendation regarding which alignment should be identified as Juneau's preferred alternative.

Alternative Alignments

The project team presented five conceptual alternatives for public response (Figure 1), and developed refined alignments and estimated project costs for these alternatives:

- Vanderbilt Hill Road to approximately 5-mile North Douglas Highway.
- Sunny Point (east side) to approximately 5.5-mile North Douglas Highway.
- Yandukin A: Yandukin Drive to approximately 6-mile North Douglas Highway.

- Yandukin B: Yandukin Drive to the Fish Creek Road (Eaglecrest intersection), just before 7-mile North Douglas Highway, with a tunnel under the airport runway.
- Yandukin C: Yandukin Drive to Fish Creek Road (without tunnel).

Methodology

The project team met with 14 stakeholder groups; hosted two public meetings attended by 156 people, at which 34 people testified; conducted a random telephone survey of 501 Juneau households; and received 79 written comments. Stakeholder groups and individuals were asked: 1) which of the alternative crossings they prefer and why; 2) what factors they believe are most important to use in making a decision regarding a community preferred alternative; and 3) to provide any other comments regarding the crossing project. The team also met with state and federal agencies to discuss issues related to navigation, the Juneau International Airport, transportation issues, and environmental permit requirements.

Results

The Community Opinion Survey found that three-quarters of Juneau residents support or strongly support construction of a North Douglas crossing. Residents of Mendenhall Peninsula/Auke Bay/Glacier Highway beyond Auke Bay express strongest support, followed by Douglas/West Juneau, and North Douglas. Comments received during the public involvement program (not a random sample) were more evenly split between those who believe the crossing project to be a high priority and those who do not.

In the Community Opinion Survey, crossing supporters prefer Vanderbilt Hill Road corridor over Sunny Point and Yandukin Drive alternatives. Individuals who commented during the public involvement program also prefer Vanderbilt Hill Road.

The primary reasons for public support of the Vanderbilt Hill Road alternative include that it would have: 1) least impact on the Mendenhall Wetlands State Game Refuge (MWSGR), and Refuge uses and users (especially hunters); 2) least estimated construction costs; and 3) least potential for impacts to the airport's operations and future expansion needs. This rationale agrees with the survey's response that the Refuge/environment, project cost, and potential for airport impacts are the most important factors in making this decision, followed by effects on neighborhoods.

There are public comments that do not support any of the alternatives identified by the CBJ. Comments suggest considering a crossing at Salmon Creek or another location that avoids a Refuge crossing. Alternatives west of the Airport are also suggested.

The North Douglas Neighborhood Association and many residents urge the CBJ not to select a community preferred alternative at this time. They ask that the CBJ: 1) include construction of a Bench Road on Douglas Island into the crossing project; 2) prepare a comprehensive sub-area plan for North Douglas that would address safety, transportation, recreation, and other issues important to the quality of life of the residential area; and

3) complete a North Douglas impact analysis to fully identify project impacts on the residential area. Property owners also express concern about impacts to property values and quality.

Recommendations & Conclusion

The project team recommends that a crossing area at Vanderbilt Hill Road be identified as Juneau's preferred alternative for the North Douglas Crossing of Gastineau Channel (Figure 2). This alignment:

- Has the least impact on the Refuge environment, uses and users, including areas used most intensively by hunters.
- Is more likely to be permitted by environmental agencies because it has the shortest crossing length and the least fill footprint on wetlands.
- Has lowest estimated project construction costs.
- Is farthest east, so has least impact on Airport.
- Is preferred in the Community Opinion Survey and in public comments, over a crossing at Sunny Point or Yandukin Drive.

It is recommended that the preferred alternative be shown as a wider crossing area, as shown on Figure 2, as there are a number of feasible locations for the intersection within this crossing area that would meet the general characteristics for this alternative (e.g., dimensions, cost and performance.)

The Vanderbilt Hill Road alternative is the closest to the existing bridge and farthest from the West Douglas New Growth Area. However, transportation analysis conducted in 2004 shows that it will improve transportation between the mainland and Douglas Island, and enhance access to West Douglas, as well as a crossing located at Sunny Point or Yandukin Drive.

The Vanderbilt Hill Road corridor will intersect the North Douglas Highway farthest east of any of the alternatives. This will bisect the residential corridor and will increase traffic on the greatest length of the highway. To address concerns about effects on the North Douglas neighborhood, the project team recommends that the CBJ work with the North Douglas neighborhood to evaluate and plan for the crossing project's effect on the neighborhood, and to identify measures to maintain and enhance the area in terms of highway and pedestrian safety, recreation, and other qualities affected by the project. This could be done in the context of a comprehensive sub-area plan for the North Douglas area, during development of a later environmental decision document for the project, or through a separate effort associated with more detailed project design.

The CBJ's identification of a community preferred alternative for the crossing will focus future work on the project. Many steps remain including obtaining funding for planning, analysis and construction; environmental analysis and permitting; obtaining a corridor; detailed design; and construction. There will be many opportunities for public input before final decisions are made and the project is constructed.