

Ambassador Bridge/Gateway Project Major Investment Study: The First Application in Michigan

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Abstract

Michigan's first Major Investment Study (MIS) focused on access improvements to the Ambassador Bridge. The Ambassador Bridge/Gateway Project represents a public/private cooperative effort. Working with the City of Detroit, community, and private interests, the MDOT and the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) have been cosponsoring a planning study to address transportation and related land use needs associated with access improvements to the Ambassador Bridge, linking Detroit, Michigan with Windsor, Ontario. The Ambassador Bridge is privately owned and operated in the United States by The Detroit International Bridge Company (DIBC). This project specifically addresses the need for long-term congestion mitigation and direct access improvements between the Ambassador Bridge and Michigan's State trunk-line highways, which include I-96 and I-75 of the Interstate System.

This project is unique for several reasons: (1) it represents a cooperative effort with a privately-owned international bridge; (2) it involves an ethnic neighborhood—Mexicantown—that in addition to a cooperative effort was protected consistent with the President's Order on Environmental Justice; and (3) it involved a consortium of state, local and federal agencies and the private sector represented by a Steering Committee that provided guidance throughout the project.

The project included an intense public involvement effort. Public meetings were combined with numerous one-on-one outreach efforts. Alternative access design concepts were progressively developed both in number and scope from illustrative concepts, to practical alternatives, and finally resulting in a preferred alternative. Item after item was debated at the Project Steering Committee meetings, which the public was invited to attend, and did!

The resulting MIS was completed months ahead of schedule; with public support and a community that endorsed the project openly; and a package of \$100 million in highway access improvements without displacing any buildings within an urban setting.

The disappointments include the inability to satisfy all the geometric design guidelines and standards ascribed to by the MDOT. The project area was so tight, and the goal of minimal neighborhood impact so important that exceptions to design standards will be required in several places.

The Ambassador Bridge/Gateway MIS is a major success. It is the first approved MIS in Michigan. It demonstrates that cooperation and communication are key to resolving complex issues as part of the MIS process.

In September 1995, the Michigan Department of Transportation (M-DOT), in cooperation with the Southeastern Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG), officially initiated the engineering and environmental studies for the Ambassador Bridge/Gateway Project. The studies are required to determine the best alternative to improving access at the United States end of the Ambassador Bridge, which links Detroit, Michigan and Windsor, Canada (Figure 1). The study was guided by a Steering Committee composed of public agency representatives from the Michigan Department of Transportation, SEMCOG, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA),



Figure 1
PROJECT AREA

and the City of Detroit, with U.S. Customs and the United States General Services Administration acting as federal cooperating agencies. The privately-owned Detroit International Bridge Company (DIBC) was also a member of the Steering Committee. DIBC owns the Ambassador Bridge. Additionally, a citizens involvement group was instrumental in the exchange of information on the project. It included members of local groups, businesses, social service agencies and others rooted in the community.

The project followed a relatively new planning process that allows a narrowing of alternatives through preparation of a Major Investment Study (MIS) (Figure 2). An MIS is now required for major investments of federal transportation funds within areas of the state under the authority of a metropolitan planning organization, of which SEMCOG is one. It is designed to streamline the process leading to project implementation by focusing attention on appropriate decision-making.

The Problem

The problem being addressed by the MIS is the need for improved access at the United States end of the Ambassador Bridge. Access improvements are key to accommodating future border crossing traffic which is growing exponentially and is stimulated by trade among the United States, Canada and Mexico. A brief description of access to the Bridge is important to understanding this project.

Cars and trucks departing the U.S. get to the Bridge by Michigan's trunkline system using a local street (Porter Street) to get to the Bridge plaza (Figure 3). A toll is paid on the U.S. plaza and the vehicle crosses to Canada, where it passes through Canadian Customs. In the United States, the traveler has the opportunity to buy duty-free (untaxed) goods that can be carried into Canada. This is to occur in a "sterile" area so that officials of the U.S. Customs Services can be assured that no one is purchasing duty-free goods and then staying in the United States.

One may enter the U.S. using the Ambassador Bridge either as an auto or a commercial vehicle. Tolls are first paid in Canada. Then, all vehicles are subject to U.S. Customs inspection. Autos proceed directly north over the bridge plaza then pass through Customs booths. Inspection may be cursory or may require parking in an adjacent area for more thorough inspection. Autos then are confronted with a stop-light controlled, five-way intersection before they can access the freeway system or travel local streets to their destinations.

Commercial vehicles entering the U.S. get into a dedicated lane at the end of the Ambassador Bridge and make a 180-degree turn into a large U.S. Customs facility. There they go through primary inspection and may be subject to rapid release; or, more paperwork may be involved and secondary inspection may follow. Some trucks are returned to Canada via a secured route, if there is some problem with the cargo or its documentation. Otherwise, all trucks depart the U.S. Customs facility onto Fort Street, which is spanned by the Ambassador Bridge. Once on Fort Street, trucks proceed east to Rosa Parks Boulevard or west to Clark Street to access the freeway system.

Affected Area

The project is in the Hubbard-Richard Citizens District and the Mexicantown Commercial District of the City of Detroit. Construction of I-75 split the area and left deep scars on both the physical and sociological fabric of the community (Refer to Figure 1). Along with the overall and significant outmigration of the population of Detroit, the result has been a large amount of vacant land, both on the east and west sides of the freeway. Nevertheless, those who have chosen to

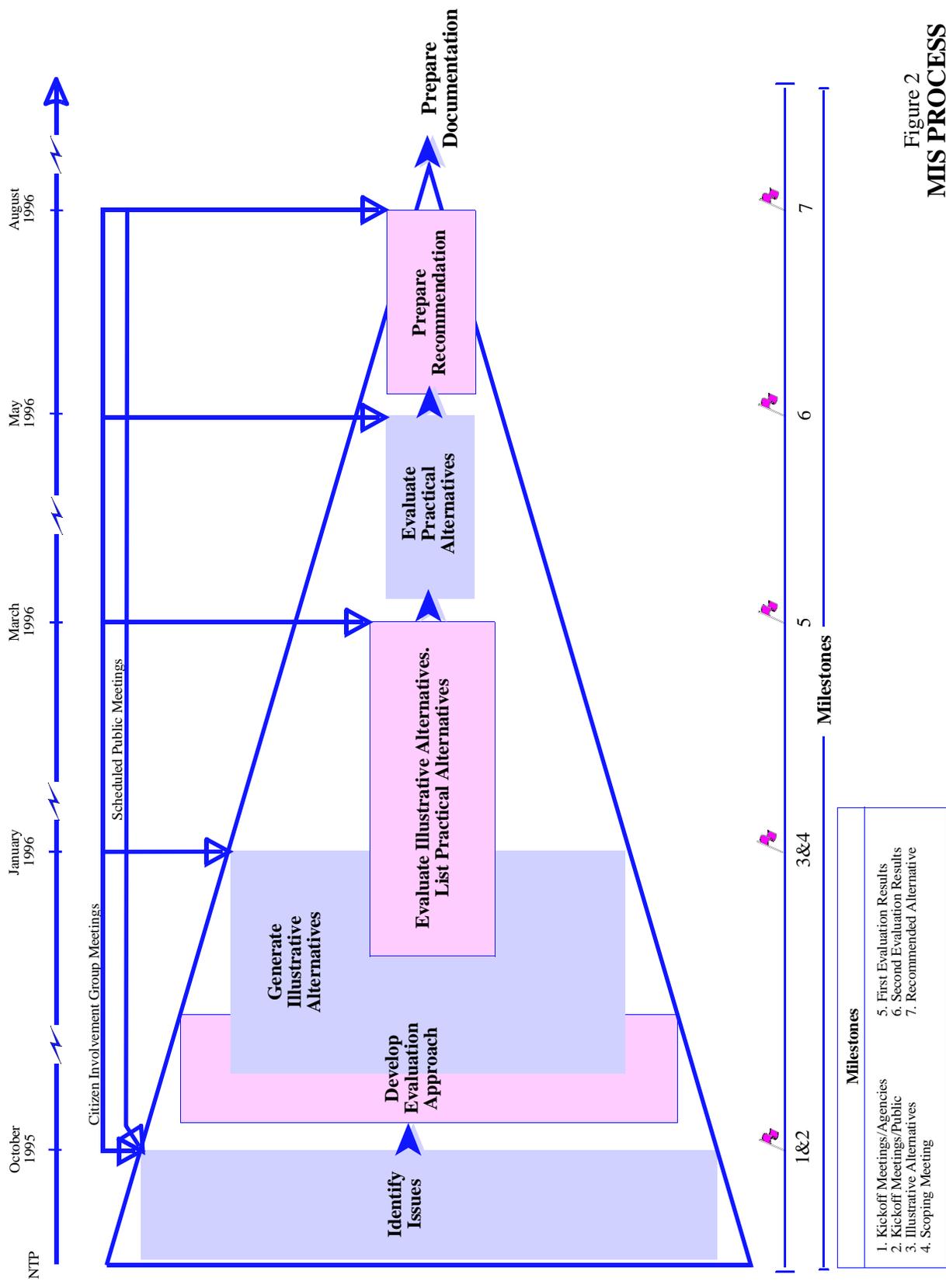


Figure 2
MIS PROCESS

remain are committed to see the area improve. The study area includes a restaurant district fronting on Bagley Street on the east and west sides of I-75.

The BUOY (Businesses United with Officers and Youth) Center, a local center for community activities sponsored by the Detroit Police and local business owners, is also an anchor in the area. Likewise, the Roberto Clemente Community Center located on the east side of the freeway and the Latino Family Services Center located on Fort Street at West Grand Boulevard are major sources of community activity and pride.

The Third Precinct Police Station is located in the northern part of the study area. And, while it is slated for closure and consolidation with another precinct, a police mini-station is likely to remain in the area and could be incorporated into the Gateway Project. Other significant activity centers include the Daniel Webster Elementary School on the west side of the freeway and St. Anne's Church, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, on the east side of I-75.

The Need for Trust

The conditions of the Hubbard-Richard area clearly reflect physical deterioration. Additionally, and, perhaps less visible, is that the process of change has so scarred the community and created mistrust among various factions that, for over 20 years, it has been impossible to advance a solution to the transportation problems at and around the Ambassador Bridge.

Such mistrust greeted the Ambassador Bridge/Gateway Project from the very outset and, only through an extensive public outreach program was it possible to build credibility. This outreach process was fostered by the President's Executive Order 12898 which mandates that environmental justice for minority and low-income populations must be a key part of any federal transportation project.

Clearly, the Hubbard-Richard/Mexicantown community has paid its price over the years in terms of lost housing, disruption of community cohesion, and physical separation of a thriving ethnic enclave. The Ambassador Bridge/Gateway Project was focused at the outset on attempting to minimize any further disruption.

Community Outreach

Numerous meetings were held during the course of the study to solicit information from the public, interested groups and agencies. As noted earlier, the study was guided by a Steering Committee and involved a Community Involvement Group of interested parties. The public was directly involved at all stages with five rounds of meetings held prior to the public hearing (Table 1). Additionally, and more important, dozens of meetings were held with individuals and small groups so that those who had an interest in the project could articulate their concerns in a less-intimidating, more informal setting. A toll-free telephone number was also provided through which anyone could contact the project at any time. An immediate response was then forthcoming.

Another important aspect of the outreach effort was the invitation to all Community Involvement Group members to the Steering Committee meetings. Key community leaders regularly attended. This included the pastor of Ste. Anne's Church and both the President and Director of the Hubbard-Richard Community District Council. Their knowledge of the detailed workings of the project and the players in the neighborhood allowed them to contribute significantly, particularly

Table 1: Meeting Summary

Date	Subject
October 4 and 5, 1995	Public Kickoff Meeting
January 10 and 11, 1996	Presentation/Review of Illustrative Alternatives — MDOT Official Pre-Study Meeting
February 2, 1996	Scoping Meeting for Agencies and Organizations
March 6 and 7, 1996	Evaluation of Illustrative Alternatives
May 8 and 9, 1996	Evaluation of Practical Alternatives/Identification of Refined Alternative
July 9, 1996	Workshop for Refined Alternative
January/February, 1997	Public Hearing

to the final meetings wherein the community's support was gained for going ahead with the project.

Alternatives

Fifteen alternatives were originally considered as well as the Transportation System Management, Mass Transit and Do Nothing options. The preliminary alternatives were displayed publicly in January 1996. No recommendations or evaluations were displayed at that time so that the public could have complete input to shaping and reshaping the options. Subsequently, a scoping meeting was held in February among all agencies and organizations that could be affected by the project. This input then led to meetings in March 1996, which led to evaluation of the 15 options. The public played a role in the evaluation. The alternatives surviving this screening were then reviewed in additional detail, leading to the definition in May of a single alternative with the potential to both minimize impacts and optimize access to the Ambassador Bridge. The preferred alternative was then defined in great detail and computer simulations were presented in a day-long workshop which was held in July 1996 to give the public a clear view of how the alternatives would fit into the community (Figure 4).

A key component of the preferred solution is a pedestrian linkage across I-75/I-96. The community was quite vociferous in its opinion that a link had to re-connect the two sides of the Hubbard-Richard/Mexicantown area. Alternative pedestrian crossing concepts were developed for the public meetings. Each included space for a mini-station to be staffed 24 hours a day by the Detroit Police. This will provide the security necessary to increase the use of the pedway.

Another important physical element in redevelopment of the community is construction of a privately sponsored Travel Information Center/Retail Complex. This facility could represent as much as 80,000 square feet of commercial space to serve the needs of the surrounding community as well as the traveling public. The preferred alternative provides direct access to the Travel Information Center so that its viability is enhanced.

Impacts of The Preferred Alternative

The most significant aspect of this proposed \$100 million project is that only one residential unit

Figure 4
**FUTURE CONDITIONS AT
 AMBASSADOR BRIDGE**



will be taken by its construction. Additional relocations affect the duty-free operations which must be placed in a “sterile” area consistent with the new design.

The Michigan State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) found two districts in the project area to be potentially eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. However, because of the ability to fit the alternative almost entirely within the existing right-of-way, the SHPO found that the project had no adverse affect on these areas. The SHPO further found no adverse affect on two individual properties of historic significance in the area. The project has since been approved by the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation as “reasonable and prudent.”

Other positive effects of the project are increased safety through better access to the Bridge to handle almost twice as much traffic in the next 20 years as is present today; improved air quality, as Bridge traffic is not interrupted by stop lights; and, the enhancement of local access through a pedestrian crossing between the two sides of the Hubbard-Richard/Mexicantown area.

Public Hearing and Subsequent Response

Because of the need to address a number of unique engineering design issues in detail, contact between the public affected, and the Steering Committee, virtually stopped between July 1996 and the public hearing held in February 1997. As a result, the community’s response in February to the preferred alternative was one of confusion. And, a number of entities, particularly commercial interests on the west side of I-75/I-96, as well as both residential and business interests on the east side of the freeways, indicated some opposition to the project. To address this matter, the Steering Committee met on a one-to-one basis with the affected parties to gather more information about their concerns. Alternative concepts that they defined were reviewed in detail and a list of impacts was developed consistent with similar work prepared during the early portion of the project when various alternatives were investigated. As a result of this contact, adjustments were made to the project. These include reconnecting Bagley Street to the service drive on the east side of the freeway (Figure 5); establishing gateways on Fort Street at both 18th and St. Anne’s Streets; and, potential use of ISTEA/NEXTEA “enhancement” funding to improve access to the east side of Hubbard-Richard/Mexicantown. With these adjustments, the community representatives who opposed some aspect of the project were willing to support it.

A Final Note

As a result of the close relationship between the project’s Steering Committee and the community, Michigan’s Governor Engler included it in his State of the State Address as one of only two projects for new construction. This allowed everyone to realize that after over 20 years of frustration, the project had the support of all levels of government because of the willingness of the community to trust and contribute.

