

# North Whidbey Island Access Feasibility Study

## White Paper

December 2007 update

This white paper is intended to clarify the Washington State Department of Transportation's (WSDOT) current thinking on the recommendations from the North Whidbey Island Access Feasibility Study.

No significant changes have occurred since the study was published in May of 2000 that would alter the recommendations that a bridge or ferry system from the north end of Whidbey Island to either Camano Island or the main land would be infeasible due to financial and environmental constraints.

### Background

The North Whidbey Island Access Feasibility Study was initiated in August 1998 to explore possible options to provide additional vehicular access to the northern area of Whidbey Island. The most recent update to the Island County Comprehensive Plan indicated that future traffic volumes at the SR 20 Deception Pass Bridge would overwhelm the existing bridge's ability to handle the traffic volume during the peak period. Current estimates show a doubling of current traffic volumes reaching capacity in approximately 2025.

The current route for SR 20 runs through Deception Pass State Park and the Deception Pass/Canoe Pass Bridges are listed as historic landmarks. Any widening of the SR 20 facility through the park would be constrained by federal environmental regulations regarding impacts to parks and significant cultural resources. The current 2007-2026 WSDOT Highway System Plan <http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/planning/HSP> does not include any modification or replacement of the existing Deception Pass/Canoe Pass Bridges or widening of SR 20.

WSDOT and Island County embarked on this North Whidbey Island Access Feasibility Study to identify any feasible alternatives that would connect SR 20 to Interstate 5 as an alternative to increasing capacity at Deception Pass. Alternatives included both vehicular capacity by ferry and bridge.

Key tasks of the study process were:

- To evaluate potential locations for:
  - New bridge connection from North Whidbey Island to the I-5 corridor

- Additional vehicular ferry service/facility between Whidbey Island and the mainland/Stanwood or Camano Island.
- To identify feasible alternatives from the potential locations for the expansion of the existing transportation network serving on/off island travel from Whidbey Island.
- To provide feasibility analysis for further consideration in the update of local and regional plans.

In April 2000 the North Whidbey Island Access Feasibility Study concluded with the Skagit/Island Regional Transportation Planning Organization (S/I RTPO) Transportation Policy Board approving the Policy Committee's recommendation not to pursue additional funding for an Environmental Impact Statement. This decision was reached because no feasible alternatives were found.

It was agreed that each of the alternatives could be determined not feasible due to the potential for environmental impacts to critical areas and to habitat. In addition, the ferry alternative was considered not feasible due to the costs to implement and operate.

### **Description of Alternatives for Feasibility Evaluation**

The following is a brief description of the findings of the study for each of the four alternatives studied:

- Bridge from North Whidbey Island to LaConner Vicinity
  - Construction Cost Estimate: \$321.1 million
  - Operations and Maintenance cost estimate: \$1.36 million annually
  - This alternative was determined to be flawed for the following reasons:
    - Negative impact on chinook salmon, bull trout, and coho salmon habitat
    - Eleven bald eagle nests within 0.5 mile of the proposed alignment
    - Negative impact on critical and irreplaceable eelgrass beds
    - Negative impact on estuarine intertidal habitat
    - Potential impact on at least 20 wetland areas
    - Difficulty in obtaining required permits
- Bridge from North Whidbey Island to Fir Island and Conway Vicinity
  - Construction Cost Estimate: \$183.4 million
  - Operations and Maintenance cost estimate: \$1.10 million annually
  - This alternative was determined to be flawed for the following reasons:
    - Negative impact on chinook salmon, bull trout, and coho salmon habitat

- Up to four bald eagle nests within 0.5 mile of the proposed alignment
  - Negative impact on critical and irreplaceable eelgrass beds
  - Negative impact on estuarine intertidal habitat
  - Potential impact on at least 16 wetland areas
  - Difficulty in obtaining required permits
- Bridge from Strawberry Point to North Stanwood Vicinity, via NW 300th
    - Construction Cost Estimate: \$260.3 million
    - Operations and Maintenance cost estimate to be \$1.42 million annually
    - This alternative was determined to be flawed for the following reasons:
      - Negative impact on two salmon accessible streams
      - Three bald eagle nests in three bald eagle territories are within 0.5 mile of the alignment.
      - Negative impact on critical and irreplaceable eelgrass beds
      - Negative impact on estuarine intertidal habitat
      - Potential impact on at least 60 wetland areas
      - Difficulty in obtaining required permits
- Ferry Alternative from Whidbey Island to North Stanwood Vicinity
    - Construction Cost Estimate: \$221.7 million to \$297.7 million
    - Operations and Maintenance cost was not estimated
    - This alternative was determined to be flawed for the following reasons:
      - For all ferry route alternatives, two salmon-bearing streams would be potentially affected
      - Three bald eagle nests in three bald eagle territories are within 0.5 mile of the alignment
      - Negative impact on critical and irreplaceable eelgrass beds
      - Negative impact on estuarine intertidal habitat
      - Potential impact on at least 60 wetland areas
      - Difficulty in obtaining required permits

## **Current Discussions**

### Existing Bridges

Although the study concluded that the design life of the Deception Pass/Canoe Pass Bridges was approaching, recent discussions with the WSDOT Bridge Office have revealed that these bridges could be preserved indefinitely, but at an ever-increasing cost.

At some point in time replacement of these bridges, in their existing configuration, may be necessary in order to cost effectively maintain this vital transportation link. An in-depth analysis of when this would occur has not been done.

#### Future Land Use

Potential changes in land use, based on additional access via a new bridge or ferry route, is another issue that was raised in the North Whidbey Island Access Feasibility Study. Future updates of the Island County Comprehensive Plan should evaluate what chances in land use patterns could occur if any of the alternatives studied in the in the North Whidbey Island Access Feasibility Study we developed. This could help to gage community reaction to the potential for land use changes that could accompany increased on/off Island transportation system capacity.

#### Facility Funding Realities

Although it is likely that on/off Island transportation system capacity may be reached in the future, there is also recognition that the funding capacity of WSDOT is very limited, even to conduct an Environmental Impact Statement.

Currently WSDOT has several unfunded EIS's in the financially unconstrained element of the Washington Transportation Plan (WTP).

#### **Conclusion**

The findings of the North Whidbey Access Feasibility Study determined that all of the evaluated alternatives contained multiple flaws. These flaws included serious environmental impacts, permitting difficulties, and funding issues. As a result of these flaws, and our impression at WSDOT that no significant changes have occurred, we recommend that no further analysis be conducted at this time.

WSDOT, along with our local government partners, will continue to monitor the situation and determine if conditions have changed that would warrant additional action.