

MEETING SUMMARY

OR126: Veneta to Eugene

Steering Committee Meeting #4

MEETING Thursday, October 28, 2021
2:00-3:30 pm

LOCATION Online

ATTENDANCE Members present:

- Jay Bozievich, Lane County Commissioner
- Frannie Brindle, ODOT Area 5 Manager
- Kelly Clarke, LCOG Senior Transportation Planner
- Randy Groves, City of Eugene Councilor
- Rob Inerfeld, City of Eugene Transportation Planning Manager
- Rich Lopez, Coos Bay Rail Line General Manager
- Matt Michel, City of Veneta City Administrator
- Mike Miller, City of Florence Public Works Director
- Naomi Zwerdling, ODOT Region 2 Planning Manager
- Sasha Vartanian, Lane County Transportation Planning Supervisor

Absent:

- Tom Schwetz, Lane Transit District Planning and Development Director

Staff:

- Molly Cary, ODOT Project Manager
- Dave Simmons, DOWL NEPA Coordinator
- Ellen Teninty, Cogito Public Involvement Lead
- Chris Watchie, Cogito Public Involvement Support

Welcome and Introductions – Teninty and Simmons

Ellen Teninty welcomed the Steering Committee (SC) members and conducted a roll call for introductions. She requested SC members voice questions and use the virtual chat function only to add resources for the group.

Dave Simmons next reviewed the agenda and purpose of the last Steering Committee’s meeting to brief agency partners on public outreach results, progress on technical work and to review/discuss coordination aspects.

Public Involvement Update– Simmons and Teninty

Dave Simmons provided an overview of the April 2021 second round of constituent consultations to review the study’s progress. The first round occurred in August 2020 to confirm the direction established by the 2013 Fern Ridge Corridor Plan. Groups included:

- Highway Users: commuters, businesses, freight, emergency services vehicles
- Pedestrians, Bicyclists, and Boaters
- Environmental, Hunting, Fishing

The purpose of this second round of consultation with project-area stakeholders representing a wide cross-section of users was to:

- Discuss the engineering and environmental studies
- Learn from a wide range of user experiences
- Listen and respond in real time to concerns and document them
- Gather wetland mitigation strategy suggestions
- Explain schedule of the current NEPA effort and future project phases
- Expand the pool of local leaders who understand the project
- Invite participants to share information with their organizations
- Cascade information out to their communities about project and the pending online Open House #2
- Dave reviewed the key input from participants:
 - Continued support for 4-lane alternative with separate multi-use path
 - Mixed support and some apprehension with roundabouts
 - Concern with project impacts to fish, wildlife, and plants

Ellen noted the consultations' intent was also to confirm if the corridor problems were well understood and defined and if the proposed solutions rationally addressed them. Groups were intended to be not large in size but comprised of diverse users who have used the corridor over time, and to hear a variety of perspectives. She reminded the Steering Committee they had received the summaries and seen the quality of the input from community consultation participants.

- Dave next reviewed the summary of input from the April-May 2021 online open house:
 - Continued support for the 4-lane alternative with separate multi-use path (with four out of the 68 comments received opposed to road widening due to concerns over natural resource and climate impacts)
 - Two-thirds of comments indicated a preference for traffic signals over roundabouts

Ellen provided a brief summary of the public outreach. She noted the challenges of reaching stakeholders amid a pandemic and severe wildfire smoke prior to the project open houses. Establishing key community partnerships fostered creative methods to notify corridor users input opportunities including:

- E- updates to the interested parties list compiled through outreach and existing ODOT lists
- Corridor area postcard mailings
- A-frame signs at key intersections
- A-frames with QR codes to scan in front of stores
- Electronic reader boards (e.g., Veneta fire station, Fern Ridge School District)
- Fern Ridge School District's auto-call to over 1,500 households to further reach Title VI and Environmental Justice communities

She noted having "boots on the ground" and getting the word out about the online open houses and survey through leveraging the local community contacts proved very successful. In particular, she recognized some key community agencies/organizations and their critical role in reaching the broader community:

- Mid Lane Cares, The Love Project

- Meals on Wheels, Lane Council of Governments, Senior and Disabled Services
- Food for Lane County
- Saint Vincent de Paul
- Homes for Good
- Fern Ridge School District

In addition, project staff responded personally to over 70 comments via email or by phone reflecting a sincere and high level of respect for the public's time and input.

Regarding roundabouts, Dave reviewed the following key points:

- A decision on the intersection treatments (roundabouts, signals, etc.) will not be made until funding is secured for the project.
- Roundabout intersections take up more space and are therefore being used for the environmental evaluations to reflect the greatest potential level of impact.
- Apprehension of roundabouts is not uncommon in communities unfamiliar with them.

A graphic illustrating how roundabouts function with a leg crossing railroad tracks was presented. This was prepared by the project team and sent to the City of Veneta staff to support discussions within their community. Similar to other intersection types, cars would be directed to stop prior to entering the intersection when waiting for the train to pass.

Discussion:

- Councilor Groves: I appreciate the opinions shared. How do we slow down traffic as they enter Eugene where the speed transition occurs? Without heeding the speed change, traffic stopped in a congested area can have bad outcomes. Need to look for ways to enhance safety elements. If we don't go with a roundabout, how do we slow down traffic in the safest way?
 - Dave responded that it's not uncommon to have a sense of apprehension about roundabouts. Even though they are not new in the U.S., this reaction is very consistent with other communities. There are many examples of once communities become familiar with them, they see and experience the benefits.
- Rich Lopez noted when Coos Bay Rail Line met with ODOT project staff they talked about rail and roundabout configuration. The concern was people speeding up and trying beat the train across the tracks. The Port of Coos Bay has a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with NorthPoint Development to build a shipping container facility that will increase the volume of train traffic with faster and longer freight trains. Will there be center medians and extended warning lights with rail gates activated?
 - Dave responded that he anticipates treatment will include active signage to advise cars of signal activation in advance and raised "splitter islands" (medians) that prevent cars from driving around the crossing gates. Under this scenario, there will be better control than there is today at the railroad crossing.
- Dave also noted that faster trains will mean they will be passing through the railroad crossings faster.
- Rich replied that wasn't necessarily true since the trains will be longer (up to 200 cars and 1-2 miles long).
- Frannie and Rob Inerfeld requested Rich's contact info to know more about the MOU with Northpoint Development.

- Rob mentioned that the City of Eugene as part of their downtown “quiet zone” planning will build similar gates that cars cannot go around.
- Dave shared that the project team, ODOT, Coos Bay Rail and the City of Veneta completed a diagnostic review of the railroad crossings to outline the necessary improvements, expectations, easements, and features. A draft MOU between ODOT and Coos Bay Rail is in process.
- Councilor Groves asked about when is the start of long trains along the corridor.
- Rich answered at the end of 2023/2024 but other projects could affect rail traffic within 18-24 months.
- Councilor Groves noted his concern with trains and people trying to reach the airport using Green Hill Road.

Engineering Update– Simmons

Dave reviewed the final Proof of Concept (POC) with refinements for the corridor geographic sections:

GREEN HILL ROAD SECTION

- Changes to POC:
 - The roundabout designs throughout the project now include updated bicycle and pedestrian design elements, including warning signs for pedestrians and rectangular rapid flashing beacons.
 - Shifted the roundabout to the east to reduce impact to a Green Hill Road residence south of OR 126.

COYOTE CREEK SECTION

- The unofficial public recreational water access on OR 126 next to the Coyote Creek Bridge will be removed.
- Changes to POC:
 - Addition of a retaining wall east of the Coyote Creek Bridge to maintain the channel alongside the road because of user input and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) discussions.

CENTRAL ROAD INTERSECTION

- Project staff met with USACE and Lane County to discuss access into Perkins Peninsula Park.
- Changes to POC:
 - Refinements to park entrance with a revised gate location and connections to boat launch area and gravel parking lot. Revised gate location allows the USACE/County to close the park to vehicles during the winter and maintain access to a gravel lot outside the gate where users can park and enter on foot.
- Highlighted the presence of resource areas with sensitive cultural resources.

ELLMAKER ROAD

- The intersection did not meet traffic signal requirements.
- Recommendation is for a roundabout or turn lane improvements which include providing turn lanes on the side road and a median acceleration lane for vehicles entering onto OR 126.
- The roundabout concept would impact Dari Mart and one residence on the eastside of Ellmaker.

- Changes to POC:
 - Minor refinements and modifications to sidewalk areas to provide complete connections through the intersection.

Ellen noted during outreach she received concerned comments about property impacts from property owners near intersections.

HUSTON ROAD


- The roundabout concept would require more space and impact commercial properties on the north side of the roadway, particularly on the west side of Huston Road.
- Changes to POC:
 - Minor refinements and modifications to sidewalk areas to provide complete connections through the intersection.

Environmental Documentation Update: Simmons

ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

Discipline Areas

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Air Quality (Completed). • Archaeological (Underway). • Biological Resources (Underway). • Community/Envir. Justice. • Hazardous Materials (Completed). • Historic Resources. (Drafted) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Land Use (Underway). • Noise (Underway - Revising). • Parks & Recreation. • Water Quality/Hydrology (Drafted). • Wetlands (Underway).
--	---



Dave reviewed the status of the project's environmental studies and provided updates on five discipline areas:

Air Quality: Completed. Project impacts fall below thresholds triggering action/mitigation.

Noise: Report being revised to address roundabout intersections. No material change expected. With earlier draft, walls were evaluated at two locations and found to not meet benefit/cost thresholds and are therefore not recommended.

Archeological: (Additional work planned) Some delay in getting rights of entry permissions. Pedestrian survey completed. Some shovel tests have been performed within High Probability Areas. Additional shovel testing is planned. One site so far has been recommended for Phase II testing/investigations. No Phase II work will need to be completed as part of NEPA process, but rather prior to construction. The corridor's POC establishes the overall footprint to direct further studies.

Historic: (Incremental progress) Four sites identified. Determination of Eligibility (DOE) process completed. Finding of effects process underway. Baseline survey and report completed. DOE forms for two sites have been prepared and reviewed by SHPO. Finding of Effect forms are now being prepared for these two sites.

Land Use: West Eugene Wetlands

Dave reviewed the West Eugene Wetlands map and highlighted key issues:

- Within the project limits there are three wetlands designated as “Protect” in the West Eugene Wetlands Plan (WEWP). The WEWP is a refinement to the Eugene-Springfield Metropolitan Area General Plan (Metro Plan).
- Policy 3.22 of the WEWP limits how much can be affected or converted (up to one-acre) to a planned transportation corridor without amending the WEWP. The final OR 126 POC impacts exceed one-acre.
- Revisions to the WEWP are a Type IV land use action and require joint action by the City of Eugene and Lane County.
- Commissioner Bozievich indicated that there are additional revisions that need to be made to the Metro Plan to address other changes within Lane County that have occurred since the WEWP adoption in 2004.
- No revisions to the WEWP have occurred since adoption.
- The project team had two coordination meetings with ODOT, City of Eugene, and Lane County to discuss process, roles, and timing.

Dave highlighted the two options for lead applicant for the Type IV Land Use Action, associated potential benefits, and potential drawbacks:

Lead Applicant: City of Eugene and Lane County

Description: City and County self-initiate a process to revise the WEWP to align it with their respective Transportation System Plans (TSPs). Both TSPs include projects to modify OR 126. A revised WEWP could include this project and other revisions needed to update the plan for other changes within the plan boundary.

Potential Benefits:

- Demonstrates local agency support
- Allows local agencies to make other needed changes to the plan
- Separates the OR 126 project planning efforts from the local agency’s need to align their planning documents
- Reduces ODOT’s cost and staff time
- Builds on current public support for OR126 changes.

Potential Drawbacks:

- Timeline unknown
- Larger scope could increase the time required and/or the risk the process could stall

Lead Applicant: ODOT

Description: ODOT submitting applications to the City and County to request changes to the WEWP for the OR 126 project.

Potential Benefits:

- Clear and defined city and county procedures and timeline to process the application (minimum six months from time application is deemed complete).

Potential Drawbacks:

- ODOT responsible for cost and staff time to prepare and support applications through the process.
- Application focused on OR 126 project may draw additional attention.
- Not an opportunity for city to update the WEWP to include other desired projects within the plan area.

Dave continued the discussion of application timing highlighting the potential benefits and drawbacks of two scenarios:

Near-term: 3-6 months*Potential Benefits:*

- Maintains momentum while project constituents are engaged and informed.
- Demonstrates ongoing and incremental progress to the public, state and federal officials.
- Makes use of recent environmental studies.

Potential Drawbacks:

- Potential for controversy during land use process could jeopardize NEPA certification.
- May trigger adjustments to project scope, design and environmental documentation, leading to delay and need for additional resources.

Delay (until NEPA certification and/or funding secured)*Potential Benefits:*

- Separates NEPA process from local land use approvals.
- Delays potential for controversy to a later date when ODOT and or the local agencies are prepared to take the risk and expend the effort.

Potential Drawbacks:

- Loss of momentum could reduce advocate pool engaged and ready to testify in support.
- Potential for controversy remains and could delay project implementation if land use process is delayed until funding is secured.
- Delay may not serve any benefit, increasing delay with the result being a similar outcome.

Discussion

- Dave asked Frannie to make a statement from the internal ODOT perspective about these applicant options.
- Frannie shared she's had discussions with ODOT leadership including Sonny Chickering, Region 2 Manager, Erik Havig, PE ODOT Planning Section Manager, and Naomi Zwerdling, ODOT Region 2 Planning Manager. Key discussion points:
 - There are many needs in this area due to development, housing, utilities (natural gas), and others.
 - We extended the project boundaries to Green Hill Road because there was a project in Eugene's TSP and included in urban growth boundary.
 - We want to separate revising the wetland plan from with this project.

- A City and County led revision to the WEWP provides the opportunity to incorporate other needed updates to reflect current needs for housing and utilities with updated buffer areas.
- Councilor Groves asked if Northwest Natural Gas runs out to Veneta.
- Matt Michel responded, no. People use propane. There's a need for it. A company moved out of Veneta to Springfield to have access to natural gas. Getting gas extended out to Veneta is important to economic development.
- Councilor Groves asked if there was broadband in Veneta. The OR 126 Project offers an opportunity to put a 4-inch fiber highway beyond Fern Ridge and serve the north side of Hwy 126 and provide Veneta solid connection, important for economic development.
- Sasha Vartanian said there needs to be more staff conversation about direction for what is being presented. If there is interest in getting it done as quickly as possible, there may need more conversation about the path forward.
- Matt responded that the project has been underway for 10 years. Veneta has been striving, cheering, taking ownership, and participating every step of the way for this to happen for many, many years. It is of high value.
- Commissioner Bozievich added that it has been on Veneta's mind for much longer than 10 years. He'd like to do this sooner rather than later. It is the wise direction to take. It will require funds to pay County staff to work on the Type IV application if they are the applicant. The County does not have staff to do Metro Plan amendments because planning work is paid for by applications. ODOT should be prepared to pay.
- Commissioner Bozievich added that the City of Eugene and Lane County do have needed Metro Plan amendments. For the City, it's urban reserves and for the County, the Goshen Sanitary exception. Those could be held up timeline wise. Caution trying to tie this project with other projects since there is no guarantee that those amendments are going to move quickly. Negotiate with City/County to make the amendment but there may some necessity to fund staff. The County is supportive of the OR 126 project.
- Frannie stated she appreciated hearing that. ODOT Region 2 planning will look at contributing funding for the process. ODOT has to determine what's happening with the wetlands and that should not hold up the NEPA process. There is still a lot of corridor work while this application process is getting worked out.
- Rob noted that he felt similar to what Commissioner Bozievich said. He would look to ODOT to hire a firm to do the application. The City of Eugene could help shepherd the process, similar to the Beltline project. For the city, their priority is Beltline. The city is not likely to put money towards the Metro Plan amendments. He said he's concerned about political process. It could be an interesting discussion.
- Dave shared that the WEWP amendment does not need to be complete to move forward. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) needs to see documented support from local agencies to move forward and take care of the WEWP amendment.
- The FHWA wants to back a project that is viable and eventually built. One of their key tenets is local support. They do not need an amendment in place until the point of construction. Need to ensure in the NEPA process that discussions have occurred with Veneta, Lane County, Eugene and have their support for the project.
- Rob asked if Veneta had any concerns about the bicycle/pedestrian treatments closest to Veneta.

- Matt responded that they provided comments about number of driveways and potential for condensing. A southern side bike lane could avoid accidents between Veneta and Perkins Peninsula, because of concern of lack of good line of sight for bikes and pedestrians at driveways.
- Rob noted that he gets emails from Safe Lane Coalition and there were some concerns.
- Matt responded that those were comments that the city provided to Safe Lane. Veneta wanted to raise the safety issue on that commercial strip. It presents some unique development for right of way (ROW) impacts and development. The area is outside of Veneta Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) but we want Veneta to be a desirable bicycle destination. It is not insurmountable but to keep note of at this point of the process. Matt further stated that the City had submitted comments to ODOT during the POC review period and their comments were addressed satisfactorily.

Draft Implementation Plan: Simmons

Dave reviewed the Implementation Plan (see PPT presentation) based on the following considerations.

He began with the question:

If built as envisioned and what are reasonable incremental phases?

The project team suggests:

- Traffic volumes and accident rates are higher on the east end, so starting at east end with improvements will ensure the highest benefit to cost with the initial phases.
- The existing four-lane section ends at Terry Street.
- There are other phasing scenarios that could be explored, depending on funding levels, type of funding and community priorities.

Dave next provided an overview of the initial project cost estimates:

- Cost estimates have increased and numbers provided remain preliminary.
- \$250-350 million for entire corridor. The higher cost raises questions. If looking out 20 years, what solutions address congestion and safety needs? Studying the maximum footprint is a conservative approach.
- As funding becomes available and outlook becomes clear, there's an opportunity to determine where incremental spot improvements can happen.
- Improvements can be prioritized within the NEPA-cleared and approved footprint.
- If limited funding is available, could address safety needs using an incremental approach, adding turn lanes and wider shoulders where appropriate. Intersection improvements focused on safety at key locations could also be a component.
- Changes to POC: Design details include construction staging and traffic control, additional retaining walls, etc. all have increased cost estimates. A more detailed ROW estimate was prepared.

Discussion

- Frannie provided an historic perspective. OR 126 was not built to today's design standards; there are limited shoulders, no turning lanes, no median and there are high speeds. If built today, it would have a median, wider shoulders, rumble strips, etc., and be a much safer facility than exists. There is lots of room for improvement. We could choose to widen a section of the

roadway but that would require ROW acquisition, fill, safety improvements on a two-lane road. Wouldn't we want to make it wider? All of those possibilities exist.

- Commissioner Bozievich noted if limited funds are available and can't move ahead with the whole design, installing roundabouts at locations with high rate of crashes (Fisher, Central, Ellmaker and Huston) for traffic calming. Let's do all intersections first and then do widening later.
- Rob said he supports this. It's a safety-first approach. Seems so unsafe for those who have to make a left turn on the road. Is there a way to phase, but not lose the bigger vision?
- Councilor Groves concurred and asked what could we move forward for safety infrastructure given the population and congestion increases. Maybe move forward with roundabouts before widening.
- We need to move forward to get NEPA clearance for the entire concept. What gets built and when will be within our NEPA footprint and plan.
- People who have expressed opposition to 4-lanes may have no objections to safety measures. It may help to get people used to the idea.

Project Schedule Review: Simmons

Dave reviewed the project schedule and noted the following:

- Biological Assessment underway.
- Technical reports need to be completed.
- Once completed, ODOT will be able to get sign off from Federal Highway for the project, which is the final step to utilize future federal funding.

Discussion

- Councilor Groves thanked ODOT for letting him be a part of this process before he formally took office. This is such an important project with the safety improvements. He shared he'd seen a lot of tragedy.
- Rob echoed and appreciated the composition of staff and elected officials. He encouraged elected officials go and support the project to regional bodies, such as the Lane Area Commission on Transportation (ACT).
- Frannie noted she has been in discussion with Rob Zako from BEST, a Lane ACT member representing environment/land use. The timing is good for this project with the pending federal infrastructure bill. The Oregon Transportation Commission will want to hear suggestions where to invest.
- She added that it would be good to put together another slide or two if we were to do an interim safety step. What would that look like? Is it a Lane ACT issue? We want it to be discussed in a lengthy way and provide another opportunity to hear from rural communities, users, emergency management services, all of whom want to see this project as a priority on the state's system
- Councilor Groves offered to speak in front of the Lane ACT in support of the project.
- Frannie requested recognition of Representative Paul Hovey who secured HB 2017 funding for this project phase. She may call on some of the Steering Committee members to share their support for it and appreciation of his efforts to make it happen.

- Molly Cary provided an overview of the process. When a community does a NEPA project, it's important to show the biggest footprint as a worst-case scenario, that is, the maximum impact of the project. Once you get through NEPA, you can refine the design and build incrementally. The full project may not happen due to funding, but key elements of it can.
- Molly asked for the Steering Committee members that support the project to raise their hands. All meeting participants indicated support for the project.
- Frannie and Molly ended the meeting with sincere thanks and appreciation for the Steering Committee's time.