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COMMENT ON PEL LEVEL II SCREENING RESULTS

The North Douglas Neighborhood Association (NDNA) and its Second Crossing Committee submit the following comments on the PEL Level II Screening Results, reflected in the draft scoring tables that were released by DOWL on March 1 and presented to the PEL stakeholder advisory and technical committees on March 7. NDNA representatives attended the stakeholder meeting and also participated in a subsequent discussion with members of the PEL study team as a follow-up to questions raised at that meeting. A second crossing from the mainland to Douglas Island, north of the existing bridge, will transform and have lasting impacts on our neighborhood, and we appreciate the efforts by DOWL to involve NDNA in the process.

I. General Statement

The PEL process was chosen “to identify and evaluate a purpose and need for connecting Juneau with Douglas Island,” to “provide opportunities for public input and involvement,” and to improve “outreach and coordination by considering environmental, community, and economic goals early in the planning process.” FAQ (December 2022). The PEL process has largely achieved these purposes. A suite of alternatives have been identified, all of which meet the purpose and need statement according to the Level II scoring tables. All of the alternatives should therefore be considered in an ensuing NEPA review and comprehensive engineering analysis, if a crossing project moves forward.

The exception is Mendenhall Peninsula. It scores positively on the purpose and need for a crossing, but with an estimated cost 4 to 5 times higher than any of the other alternatives, is not a realistic option and does not warrant further expenditure of resources to review its merits. Our specific comments below assume that this option is not viable and we will therefore focus only on the options from Sunny Point to Salmon Creek.

We also understand that the scoring tables are based on the premise that, save for small portions of wetlands that might be filled in constructing intersections at their termini, all of the options would be built on pilings or an elevated structure. DOWL has previously acknowledged this aspect of the project and should reinforce this point in the final PEL report.

We caution against assigning too much significance to the screening results in the final PEL report. The scoring methodology is subjective and leaves considerable room for debate regarding how criteria were identified and scored, how the criteria and scores of the alternatives are weighted, and the effect of some issues not being meaningfully considered. The scoring tables should instead be regarded as preliminary, and though informative, should not presuppose how the alternatives would rate after a rigorous NEPA review and engineering analysis.

II. Specific Concerns

The comments in this section generally track the criteria as outlined in the Level II screening results overview.

A. Purpose and Need

As noted above, all of the alternatives score positively in meeting the purpose and need for a second crossing. But we question the scores assigned for some of the criteria.

Salmon Creek scores +1 point for transportation infrastructure resilience whereas the other options all score +2. The explanation is that Salmon Creek is the closest to the existing bridge and therefore provides the least resilience in the event that “natural disasters or accidents ... block both crossings.” Salmon Creek is two miles away from the Juneau-Douglas bridge, and we fail to understand what sort of event might theoretically block both but have no impact on any of the other alternatives.

All of the alternatives score equally for decreasing traffic on the existing bridge, at +1. This is contradicted by the Bridge Volume Forecast Memo, which shows that crossings at Twin Lakes or Salmon Creek reduce volume on the existing bridge much more than any of the alternatives farther west.

Twin Lakes and Salmon Creek score +1 for improved travel time whereas the other alternatives score +2. The question is, improved for whom? The explanation for the disparity focuses on providing alternative access “during the closure of the existing bridge or another single route closure...” Were the existing bridge closed for some reason, residents of Douglas and West Juneau, where the majority of island dwellers live, would benefit from having a crossing closer in if they wanted to drive downtown.

B. Additional Goals

All of the alternatives score -2 for avoiding, minimizing, or mitigating adverse impacts to the environment. We disagree that all of the alternatives have the same potential for adverse environmental impact. Salmon Creek, for instance, is outside the Mendenhall Wetlands State Game Refuge (MWSGR) and is the shortest of the crossings. Why is it scored the same as crossings at, say, Sunny Point, which would entail considerably more impact to sensitive habitat? In fact, in the succeeding section of the tables concerning environmental considerations, Salmon Creek scores a cumulative -8, which is the least impactful of all the alternatives under the criteria listed. Giving this alternative an equivalent score of -2 on overall environmental impact is contradicted by the assessment of specific environmental considerations.

The different scores for impacts to residential areas are also difficult to understand. All of the crossing alternatives would disrupt our neighborhood in one way or another, even if impacts to individual residences or discrete areas varies among them. For instance, Twin Lakes is scored at 0 – meaning no adverse impacts – which we understand is a function of a proposed terminus on currently vacant land just north of the heliport. But as the explanatory notes indicate, there are residential properties in the area which could be affected, even if not directly, and a score of -1 would be more appropriate. There is also a disparity in the scoring for Vanderbilt and Salmon Creek versus the Sunny Point alternatives. The former score -2 due to six or seven direct impacts and potentially 18 or 16 indirect impacts, respectively, whereas crossings at Sunny Point east and west are said to have two direct impacts and 15 to 48 potential indirect impacts but only score -1. This differential scoring is hard to reconcile.

C. Environmental Considerations

Under this category, the Sunny Point west alternative scores a cumulative -13 whereas the Sunny Point east alternative scores a cumulative -9, even though both would traverse a similar area of the MWSGR and would actually use the same corridor for half the crossing. This differential mainly reflects two things. One is neutral scoring for Sunny Point east on several factors: impacts to fish habitat, wildlife habitat, and migratory bird habitat. Why this alternative scores zero on these and other criteria, when Sunny Point west scores negatively on the same ones, is difficult to understand. The other is that Sunny Point east is projected to “directly affect” only 1.3 acres of wetlands whereas Sunny Point west would affect 7.2 acres. DOWL explained to us that the measure for this criterion is how many acres of fill would be needed to construct an intersection with Egan Drive, and that since Sunny Point east already has an interchange, a lesser amount of fill would be required. We take issue with such a narrow interpretation of what it means to “directly affect” wetlands. Any crossing through the MWSGR will have significant impacts on the refuge environment, regardless of the extent of fill needed to construct intersections at each end. Also, the impacts of bisecting the MWSGR with an elevated roadway must be assessed across the entire refuge, not just focus on a 100-foot buffer on either side of each crossing alternative, which we understand the current analysis entails. Nor is it apparent that other impacts from a crossing – including air and noise pollution – were among those considered in the evaluation of crossing locations.

Both of the Sunny Point alternatives share a terminus on North Douglas on CBJ land at Hendrickson Point. As discussed in NDNA’s comments on the Level I screening results (dated March 23, 2023), Hendrickson Point is designated as a “conservation area” under the current CBJ Comprehensive Plan (2013). It’s an ecologically sensitive area with important upland habitat adjacent to the Mendenhall Refuge, and is frequently used by residents in the area. We encouraged the PEL study team to consider the status and environmental values of this area in the Level II screening process, but see no indication that this was done.

All of the alternatives score -1 for affecting section 4(f) and 6(f) resources. The resource in question is the MWSGR. The explanation provided for this score is that each of the

alternatives “has the potential to impact an identified Section 4(f)/6(f) resource.” The word “potential” is misleading for crossings at Sunny Point east and west, Vanderbilt, and Twin Lakes, each of which would bisect the MWSGR. A crossing that traverses the MWSGR is certain to impact the refuge. Conversely, a crossing at Salmon Creek would be outside the refuge, or at most may nick a corner of it, and warrants a lesser score than the others. We suggest leaving Salmon Creek at -1 but adjusting the scores of all the others to -2.

The reference to section 4(f) presents another issue not directly reflected in the scoring tables, but which should be addressed in the final PEL report. As discussed in the Technical Memorandum dated February 17, 2023, section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act of 1966 prohibits using subject land for a transportation project unless two conditions are satisfied: (1) there is no prudent and feasible alternative that would avoid use of the section 4(f) resource, and (2) the project includes all possible planning to minimize harm to that property. Under the first of these standards, Salmon Creek will have to be considered as a crossing alternative in a subsequent NEPA process and comprehensive engineering analysis, even if it ends up with the lowest score in the final PEL report. The PEL study is only a preliminary phase of a crossing project, and it would be premature at this point to conclude that Salmon Creek is not a prudent and feasible alternative.

D. Social Considerations

The criteria under this category are very general and do not shed much light on the extent of impacts to the North Douglas neighborhood.

One issue not reflected in the scoring criteria is the impact to non-motorized recreational use of the MWSGR and adjacent zones, especially in the area from Lemon Creek to the west side of Sunny Point. All sorts of folks use these wetlands: hunters, fishers, birders, dog-walkers, cross-country skiers and snowshoers, and those who simply like to traipse around this extraordinary area. A crossing that traverses the MWSGR would have a significant effect on these users, limiting their ability to enjoy the area and effectively confining them to one side or the other. Hunters in particular could be affected. The general standard for state highways is no shooting within a quarter mile of a road, which, if applicable here, would mean that a swath of the refuge a half mile wide would be off limits to hunters.

E. Housing and Economic Considerations

These two categories have three identical criteria for housing and economic impacts: uses directly affected; being located within 100 feet of a residential property or commercial use; and acres of vacant land affected. The first two of these are redundant and have the effect of overweighting these considerations. This problem manifests especially for Salmon Creek. This alternative has a cumulative score of -9 under these two categories, which is more than half of its total score of -14.

F. Safety

The notes regarding this criterion focus on the number of individual “conflict points (driveways or intersections/lanes)” that each alternative has. The specific conflict points for each are not identified, which limits our ability to evaluate the scoring on this issue.

More significantly, confining the analysis to conflict points ignores the much larger issue of traffic and safety on the North Douglas Highway generally. Residents of North Douglas are acutely aware that the highway through our neighborhood is not suited to a high volume of traffic, is at or close to capacity, is unsafe for pedestrians and vehicles entering and exiting the many driveways along the road, and that these problems are only going to get worse as development on north and west Douglas Island expands. The Level II screening results do not adequately reflect these concerns or provide any suggestions for addressing them. This is especially so regarding the possibility of a bench road above the current highway.

The concept of a bench road on North Douglas Island has been part of the discussion surrounding a second crossing for decades. The idea is to divert traffic off the North Douglas Highway and thereby alleviate safety concerns for this neighborhood arterial, in much the same way that the Lena bypass rerouted northbound traffic away the Auke Rec and Lena neighborhoods. In our comments on the Level I screening results, we encouraged DOWL to evaluate the alternatives based on their potential for connection to a bench road:

[T]he analysis should not be confined to assessing where and how crossing termini would intersect the North Douglas Highway, but should also consider the potential for connecting to an uphill bench road if one were built. The purpose and need statement emphasizes the goal of improving connectivity between the mainland and Douglas Island, and limiting the analysis to a brief description of where each alternative would land on the island side of the channel does not serve that purpose.

The Level II screening analysis failed to pay heed to this request.

G. Right of Way

The explanatory notes provide DOWL’s calculation of the number of total acres of right of way that would be needed in relation to each alternative and how many parcels would have to be acquired (through purchase or eminent domain). Similar to our comment on conflict points above, without knowing which parcels would be affected, it is difficult to comment on this criterion. DOWL should clarify specifically where ROW acquisition will be required.

H. Public Support

The draft impact table attempts to measure the level of public support for each of the alternatives based on “comments received.” From the presentation to the stakeholder advisory

committee, we understood this was simply an enumeration of public comments made at different times, either directly to DOWL or at public open houses and other meetings. This would not be a statistically valid approach to gauging public opinion regarding the community's preference for a crossing location, or whether one should be built at all. In our subsequent discussion with DOWL, they clarified that a formal survey of public opinion actually was conducted and that the numbers presented in the impact table reflect the results of that effort. DOWL should publish that survey on the JD North Crossing website, so that the public can review the methodology and results. In particular, we would like to know how many North Douglas residents were included in the survey. We are unaware of any of our neighbors who were.

III. Conclusion

NDNA has emphasized in all of its comments through the PEL process that it does not take a position on whether a second crossing should be constructed and if so, which of the alternatives is preferable. Nothing in the foregoing comments should be interpreted as favoring one alternative over another. Our primary interest in this process is to ensure that the impacts to our neighborhood are fully understood and evaluated, and as best as possible, avoided, minimized, and mitigated. For over two decades we have been asking for an area planning process for North Douglas – much like the CBJ has conducted for Lemon Creek, the downtown waterfront, and West Juneau – but to date nothing has come of this request. We recognize that a planning process for our neighborhood is not within the scope of the PEL study, but we are compelled to restate our interest in such a process for the benefit of others who may be in a position to initiate one.

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the Level II screening results and look forward to remaining involved in the consideration of a crossing project.

Date: April 2, 2024



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