

Montgomery County Department of Transportation

Response to Maryland Department of the Environment Letter, Dated December 12, 2013
February 4, 2014

- 1. Please elaborate on how projected traffic improvements made a distinction between the current traffic condition, versus the additional traffic generated by future business and residential development. To what degree would a new road relieve current rush hour problems, as opposed to facilitating additional development which will exacerbate traffic issues?**

Response: One of the four purposes for Midcounty Corridor transportation improvements (as stated in the Midcounty Corridor Study Purpose and Need document) is "to relieve projected congestion on roadway facilities between Clarksburg and Gaithersburg, east of I-270." Consequently, we have not specifically analyzed the effects of the ARDS on current traffic operations. Nonetheless, we would anticipate a significant reduction in the current congestion following the implementation of any of the alternatives retained for detailed study (ARDS). Traffic analyses for the preferred alternative will be completed prior to final design to ensure satisfactory traffic operations for the year that the new roadway improvements are planned to be placed in service. The approved regional travel demand model used to forecast the future traffic volumes for this study is based on household, population, and employment forecasts that are independent of the transportation network. One of the purposes of the proposed transportation improvements is to ensure that the roadway network can accommodate master planned growth without exacerbating traffic conditions.

- 2. Table 2-1 reflects programmed road improvements assumed to be completed by 2030. The report says they have been factored into the traffic projections for each alternative. Please add a column to the table indicating which of these improvements are a component of an alternative retained for further study and some narrative to explain how the planned road project differs from the related alternative. Also, please provide the same information relative to State Highway projects within the study area that might not be reflected in Table 2-1, if any.**

Response: The improvements listed in Table 2-1 are separate capital projects that would be implemented independent of the Midcounty Corridor Study recommendation. They are assumed to be in-place under the No-Build conditions (Alternative 1), and therefore, are assumed to be in-place under all of the Build alternatives as well. A few projects that were inadvertently omitted from Table 2-1 in the DEER and have been added to the revised table provided on the last page of these responses. None of the projects in Table 2-1 are a component of a build alternative. Two individual county CIP projects for Snouffer School Road lie within the limits of Alternative 4. If Alternative 4 were selected as the preferred alternative, the proposed roadway improvements along Snouffer School Road would be constructed in accordance with Alternative 4 in lieu of the current CIP projects. A footnote has been added to the table indicating which projects coincide / overlap with the proposed MCS Alternatives. The revised table will be included in the Final EER.

- 3. Alternate 11 noted a conflict between local and thru traffic. How does that differ from the alternates retained for further study?**

Response: Several schools are located along Alternative 11, which also passes through a currently pedestrian-oriented community with higher-density residential development and retail development that focuses primarily on serving the local community. The segments of Alternative 11 along Watkins Mill Road and Stedwick Road have on-street parking,

numerous unsignalized intersections with neighborhood streets, and several private driveways. The posted speed limit on Watkins Mill Road is 35 mph (25 mph in school zones) and the speed limit on Stedwick Road is 25 mph at all times. Watkins Mill Road and Stedwick Road are roads that carry mostly local traffic. The existing roads that are along the alignment of the alternatives retained for detailed study (ARDS) pass through areas with predominantly commercial or low-density residential development, have higher posted speed limits, do not have on-street parking, and already carry a substantial mix of through and local traffic. Therefore, the potential increase in conflicts between local and through traffic would be a more significant change of character for the roads along Alternative 11 than for the other roads that comprise the ARDS. Alternative 4 contains numerous driveways and commercial entrances and the additional capacity proposed under Alternative 4 will encourage more thru traffic to utilize this corridor. Consequently, Alternative 4 may increase the potential conflicts between thru and local traffic. Alternative 5 does not significantly increase capacity along the corridor, so the current mix of through and local traffic should remain relatively constant. However, the addition of service roads along Alternative 5 should help to reduce the conflicts between local and thru traffic. Alternative 8 and 9 are partially controlled roadways with virtually no private driveways and commercial entrances. Therefore, Alternatives 8 and 9 will most effectively accommodate thru traffic movements and will attract thru traffic movements from other local roadways in the study area. Consequently, Alternatives 8 and 9 will minimize the potential conflicts between thru and local traffic.

- 4. Figure 3-1 indicates that the Tech Corridor benefit from the Midcounty Highway project extends as much to the west of I-270 as it does to the east. Does it then follow that road improvements west of I-270 could be an alternative to road improvements within the DEER study area?**

Response: No, that is not the intent of this figure. The box shown in Figure 3-1 is only intended to highlight the general area served by improvements in the Midcounty Corridor. It was not drawn based on any specific analysis. The County's approved Master Plan of Highways always intended to have one major arterial on either side of I-270. The limited access Great Seneca Highway on the west was completed in 1990, and its counterpart, the Mid County Highway, was planned to serve the same function on the east side of I-270.

- 5. The DEER indicates that accommodating planned "end-state development" is predicated on 22.3 lane miles of new highway capacity, or the "provision of alternative transportation facilities" Please describe the alternative transportation facilities that could support planned growth.**

Response: Alternative roadway alignments/improvements are the only alternative transportation facilities that could potentially support the planned growth as envisioned in the County master plans. Alternative modes of transportation (such as BRT) do not have adequate utilization rates to address the volume of traffic generated by the ongoing development that is being permitted and constructed, in accordance with locally approved Master Plans. This development relies on the implementation of the highway network and its associated capacity as programmed in the area Master Plans. Those Master Plans were approved because they provided balance between the approved land uses and the transportation infrastructure planned to serve those land uses.

- 6. One commenter noted a 20-year old projection that 42% of the people living in Clarksburg would be headed to Gaithersburg. Has this proven to be true?**

Response: Given the number of jobs to the south of Clarksburg that would serve as major attractions for work trips from Clarksburg, we would anticipate that the number of trips to the south would be in the range of 90 percent; some trips will have an end in Gaithersburg, but many more will have destinations further south. However, the percentage of people living in Clarksburg who would be headed to Gaithersburg has not been specifically determined for the Midcounty Corridor Study. Although it would be an interesting piece of information, the percentage of people living in Clarksburg who would be headed to Gaithersburg is not a necessary measure of effectiveness for the MCS. However, the total number of vehicles that would travel along each of the alternatives retained for detailed study has been projected and the high traffic volumes support the need for the planned roadway improvements.

- 7. The DEER notes none of the alternatives significantly improve travel time along Brink, Wightman, Goshen, Snouffer, or Muncaster roads. All alternatives substantially improve travel along 355. If travel time figures are important, then they need some additional clarification as they only reinforce what the report says elsewhere; that none of the alternatives make much difference along the eastern side of the study area and that in 2030, the No-build is projected to be only 6 minutes (morning commute) to 10 minutes (evening commute) slower than Alternative 9. Given the proposed environmental and community impacts associated with certain of the build alternatives, do the reported travel time improvements justify the impacts?**

Response: While the travel time savings along the Alternative 4 corridor may not be very large, the travel time savings along MD 355 are substantial. For instance, by building Alternative 9, the round trip travel time on MD 355 could be reduced by approximately 17 minutes, or a 31% reduction over the No-Build. Furthermore, the total round trip travel time on Alternative 9 itself would be approximately 23 minutes which is less than half of the No-Build travel time of 52 minutes on MD 355. Again, these savings are significant. Furthermore, when you consider that these travel times affect tens of thousands of people each day, the cost savings in terms of productivity and quality of life issues are very large. Of course, travel time reduction is just one of several benefits of the Mid-County Corridor Study project. Other benefits include reduced congestion, travel safety, improved bicycle and pedestrian facilities, accommodation of planned growth, and mobility. Consequently, the total benefits provided by each alternative are very significant, and we believe are justified if done in an environmentally sensitive manner with effective mitigation. The ability of the preferred alternative to satisfy the project purpose and need and to mitigate associated impacts will be further documented in the PA/CM, and the Final EER will include a detailed discussion of the refined impact analysis and projected outcome for the preferred alternative. MCDOT is currently evaluating each alternative and will identify a preferred alternative based on the final results of the environmental effects analysis and public/agency comment.

- 8. The combined cost to build Alternatives 2, 4 Modified and 5, based on figures in the DEER, would be \$412 million. Alternative 8 is projected to cost \$274 million and Alternative 9, \$357 million. What benefits could be achieved by combining Alternatives, 2, 5 and/or Alternative 4 Modified, utilizing the narrower right-of-way noted in the Corps comments? What would the combined cost be, given other projected road improvement projects?**

Response: MCDOT has considered the combination of alternatives, but in this case, there does not appear to be an advantage to combining alternatives. First, the improvements to Alternative 2 are essentially included within Alternative 5, so there is no advantage to combining Alternatives 2 and 5. Secondly, Alternative 4 has many property and community impacts that would only be increased by combining it with Alternative 5. As discussed in our response to the Corps, limiting the typical section of Alternative 4 Modified to an 80' ROW would require elimination of key elements such as bike lanes, sidewalk, shared use path, buffer strips and/or medians that are essential for the roadway to meet the project purpose and need. For instance, we would not eliminate or reduce the width of the bike lanes, sidewalk and/or shared use path since they are critical to providing safe and effective pedestrian and bicycle travel along the corridor. Buffer strips between the curb and sidewalk/bikepath are already at a minimal width of 3.5 feet. The 5 foot buffer width behind the bikepath/sidewalk could potentially be reduced to 2-3 feet but this would have a very minor effect on impacts while reducing the viability of sustaining healthy street trees along the corridor. Finally, a reduced right-of-way would not result in the elimination of the numerous private driveways associated with Alternative 4, which poses significant safety and operational challenges compared to a similar arterial with access controls. In summary, we do not feel a reduced Alternative 4 Modified typical section is a viable alternative since it would not adequately meet the purpose and need of the project. Consequently, we do not recommend it as a stand-alone alternative or in combination with other alternatives.

9. Please address the concerns raised in the email dated August 13, 2013 from Ms. Edna Miller. A copy of her email is attached herein.

Response: Montgomeryplanning.org/community/Gaithersburg makes reference to the future Gaithersburg East Master Plan which will be coordinated with Montgomery County Department of Transportation's study of the Mid-County Corridor highway and will include Montgomery Village, the Airpark, and surrounding communities. However, this master plan is under development and is not currently available. The MCS Draft EER considers all approved Master Plans guiding development and land use within the project area.

10. Please address the "General Comments" section of the City of Gaithersburg letter dated July 17 and the requests made elsewhere in the letter, including incorporating certain elements of Alternative 2. A copy of that letter is attached herein.

Response: Our response to the City of Gaithersburg's comments is attached.

11. Please address the concerns raised in the August 23, 2013 letter from Montgomery County Public Schools. A copy of their letter has been attached herein.

Response: MCPS is concerned with the potential impact of Alternatives 2, 5, and 9 to their schools. Alternative 2 has no impact outside of currently owned public right-of-way, so it does not impact school property. Alternative 9 has a limited amount of roadway widening along Watkins Mill Road in the vicinity of Watkins Mill Elementary, but again the impacts are limited to currently owned public right-of-way, and will not impact school property.

Alternative 5 would impact the Neelsville Middle School property located along the east side of MD 355 south of Boland Farm Road. The proposed widening along northbound MD 355 will impact the existing retaining wall and slope adjacent to the school's ball fields. If Alternative 5 were selected as the preferred alternative, construction of this alternative would require right of way acquisition for part of the slope, and construction of a new, larger

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retaining wall. This construction would potentially include temporary impacts to the area, but is not anticipated to cause permanent impacts to the ball fields.

Table 2-1: Year 2030 Programmed Roadway Improvements in the Study Area

Roadway Improvement	Location	Improvement	CLRP/CIP ID Number
Goshen Road South	South of Girard Street to 1,000 feet north of Warfield Road	Widen to a four-lane divided roadway with sidewalk and shared use path	CLRP 1226 CIP 501107
*Snouffer School Road	Sweet Autumn Drive to Centerway Road	Widen to a five-lane (four through lanes and one center turn lane) undivided roadway with sidewalk and shared use path	CIP 501109 CLRP 1236 TIP MC34
*Snouffer School Road	Centerway Road to Ridge Heights Drive	Widen to four-lane divided based on the traffic needs of the adjacent Webb Tract development which will include new facilities for several Montgomery County government agencies.	CIP 501119 CLRP TIP MC34
Ridge Road (MD 27)	Brink Road to proposed Snowden Farm Parkway (A-305)	Widen from four lanes to a six-lane divided roadway with sidewalk and shared use path. (developer funded)	CLRP 2620 TIP MS33
Snowden Farm Parkway (A-305)	Clarksburg Town Center to Ridge Road (MD 27)	Construct a new four-lane divided roadway with sidewalk and shared use path. (developer funded)	CLRP 1244 TIP MC11c
Watkins Mill Road Extended	I-270 to Frederick Road (MD 355)	Construct a new six-lane divided roadway with sidewalk and shared use path. Includes intersection improvements at MD 355.	CLRP TIP MC23a CIP 500724
I-270/Watkins Mill Road Interchange	I-270 at (new) Watkins Mill Road Extended	Construct a new interchange (SHA project)	CLRP TIP MI2q
Middlebrook Road Extended	Frederick Road (MD 355) to (new) Midcounty Highway (M-83)	Widen from three lanes to a four-lane divided roadway with sidewalk and shared use path	CLRP 1229 TIP MC14g
Woodfield Road (MD 124)	Midcounty Highway (MD 124) to Warfield Road	Widen to a six-lane divided roadway with sidewalk and shared use path. (SHA project)	CLRP 1206
Corridor Cities Transitway (CCT)	Shady Grove Metro Station to Comsat property	Construct a bus way with dedicated right-of-way	CLRP 1649

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Roadway Improvement	Location	Improvement	CLRP/CIP ID Number
Observation Drive Extended	Dorsey Mill Road to Clarksburg Road	Construct a four-lane divided roadway	CLRP 906
Dorsey Mill Road Extended	Observation Drive to Crystal Rock Drive	Construct a four-lane roadway across I-270	CLRP 1577
Little Seneca Parkway	Frederick Road to Ridge Road	Construct a four-lane divided roadway	Not in CLRP; A-302 in Clarksburg Master Plan
I-270 HOV Lanes	MD 121 to MD 85	Widen to provide a single HOV lanes in each direction.	CLRP 1186

Sources: (1) *Major Highway Improvements in the 2012 CLRP and FY2011-2016 TIP Air Quality Conformity Inputs*, MWCOG Website www.mwcog.org/clrp; and (2) *Montgomery County MD Master List of CIP Projects (FY11-16)*, Montgomery County Website www.montgomerycountymd.gov/omb.

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Improvement falls within limits of Alternative 4. If Alternative 4 were to be constructed, these projects would be built as a 4- or 6-lane divided section.