

8 Public Involvement and Coordination Efforts

Public involvement was a critical task of the study. There were five main components to the public involvement activities: 1) Stakeholder Interviews, 2) Project Team Meetings, 3) Coordination with the CUTS Technical Coordinating Committee, 4) Survey of freight haulers and warehousing businesses, and 5) Public Information Meetings.

8.1 Stakeholder Interviews

In order to gain a better understanding of the views towards transit and transportation improvement issues along the Chatham County Interstate system, face-to-face interviews with key community partners were conducted. The interviews allowed the Department to better understand the specific attitudes, perceptions, and concerns regarding transportation issues within the corridor.

8.1.1 First Round of Stakeholder Interviews

The initial round of stakeholder interviews was conducted in May 2006 with the following individuals and organizations:

- Michael Brown – City Manager, City of Savannah
- Mike Weiner – Director, Department of Traffic Engineering, City of Savannah
- Pete Liakais – Chatham County Commission Chair
- Russ Abolt – Chatham County Manager
- Eric Winger – President, Savannah Economic Development Authority
- Tom Thompson - Chatham-Savannah MPC, Executive Director
- Mark Wilkes – Director of Transportation, Metropolitan Planning Commission
- Trip Tollison – Governmental Affairs Chair, Savannah Area Chamber of Commerce
- Wayne Dawson – Disabilities Community Activist
- Lisa Sundrla – Executive Director, Savannah Development and Redevelopment Authority

8.1.2 Resounding Themes from First Round of Interviews

- There is generally strong support for the study. Many of the stakeholders, though, felt that other counties (Bryan and Effingham) should have been involved, because of growth and its subsequent impacts.
- There are also several State Routes that need to be considered through coordination including:
 - SR 21 (leading to the Port area growing at a rate of 21% per year),
 - SR 204 (significant commercial and residential growth) and

- SR 80 (used as an alternate to I-95 into Chatham County from Effingham County).

- There are high-profile growth issues facing the County and the study must consider these issues. It is equally important that economic development data be received from the State level as it is at the local level. The State is heavily recruiting for a major development (preferably auto manufacturer) for the area at the northeast corner of I-95 and I-16. If developed, the area would experience significant traffic congestion and needs to be looked at. There are between 15 and 17 thousand acres with two 250-acre pads ready for building.
- The Port is experiencing major growth, which will lead to the doubling of truck traffic. State Route 21 is heavily congested with truck traffic and other industrial and residential growth in the vicinity.
- Strong residential growth is beginning to occur west of I-95 with several national residential builders looking at large tracts of land. Future growth must be taken into consideration.
- All stakeholders felt that a regional look at the transportation issues is needed and that sooner or later, transit outside of Savannah will need to be considered. Currently, there is no access to many parts of the County without a car. Also, if additional job growth occurs, many will not be able to take advantage because of the lack of transportation.
- Public involvement must be localized and not too broad. The outreach should focus on areas where definite improvements are likely to occur.

8.1.3 Second Round of Stakeholder Interviews

The second round of stakeholder interviews was conducted in June and July 2007 with the following individuals and organizations:

- Eric Winger – President, Savannah Economic Development Authority
- Mark Wilkes – Director of Transportation, Metropolitan Planning Commission
- Trip Tollison - Governmental Affairs Chair, Savannah Area Chamber of Commerce
- Lisa Sundrla – Executive Director, Savannah Development and Redevelopment Authority
- Mayor Otis Johnson - City of Savannah
- Tom Thompson - Chatham-Savannah MPC, Executive Director
- Randy Weitman - Georgia Ports Authority
- Col. Al Bungard - Chatham County Engineering, County Engineer
- Al Black - Chatham County Engineering, Assistant County Engineer

8.1.4 Resounding Themes from Second Round of Interviews

- The I-95 at I-16 interchange is dangerous and needs immediate attention. Existing lighting at this interchange is inadequate.
- Congestion at the SR 204 interchange with I-95 causes dangerous conditions and needs to be carefully evaluated.
- Dean Forest Rd. through the city has many conflicts and is a major safety issue.
- Chatham County needs an East/West corridor.
- Truck only lanes – would like a policy in place to require only truck lanes instead of free lanes.

8.1.5 Fact Sheet and Website

The study used two primary outlets for keeping the community abreast of the status of the study prior to the Public Information Meetings. The Volume 1 Fact Sheet was distributed to the seven City/County libraries, the Chatham County Government Center, and the Savannah City Hall in the fall of 2006. The Volume 2 Fact Sheet, distributed in March of 2007, provided an update on the Needs Assessment portion of the study. In April 2008, a final Fact Sheet was distributed before the final round of public meetings. Web updates were made in conjunction with the distribution of the fact sheets.

8.1.6 Public Meetings

On April 23, 2008, public meetings were held in the Port Wentworth City Hall from 2:00pm to 4:00pm and at the Coastal Georgia Center in downtown Savannah from 6:00pm to 8:00 pm. At these meetings, the potential project recommendations of the Plan were displayed. GDOT and project team representatives were present to provide a detailed explanation of each recommendation. These public meetings were conducted in an open house forum.

8.2 Coordination Efforts

This study was not conducted in isolation. There were three other critical ongoing studies that played a key role in shaping the results of this study: The Statewide Truck Lanes Needs Identification Study, the SRTA Northwest Toll Expressway Study and the Effingham Parkway Study. In each case, the project team worked closely with members of those other studies to coordinate modeling efforts, findings, and recommendations. The status of each of the related studies can be found below.

8.2.1 The Statewide Truck Lanes Needs Identification Study

Concurrent to this study, the Department conducted the Statewide Truck Lanes Needs Identification Study, which examined the implementation of truck only lanes on sections of Interstate and other limited-access highways across the state. The truck lanes study has concluded. It stated in the findings it released in April 2008, that truck only lanes were not recommended for any segment of Interstate or limited-access highway in Georgia.

8.2.2 The SRTA Northwest Toll Expressway Study

SRTA is studying the possibility of creating a new toll facility between I-16 and I-95 with direct access to the Port of Savannah. The Study will consider several alignments and toll options for the facility. It will also consider the effectiveness of managed lanes – lanes that are truck-only or HOV all or part of the time. The primary purpose of the proposed expressway is to improve truck access between the port and distribution facilities and the interstate system. Again, the project team is working closely with members of this study to ensure proper coordination.

8.2.3 Effingham Parkway

Effingham County is planning an improved four-lane facility with a median that would come from Effingham County and terminate at or near I-95. The Chatham County portion of the project is in the CUTS 2030 LRTP under “Burns Parkway,” and the Savannah MPO is working with the Parkway’s project team. At this time, the MPO supports the extension of the parkway into Chatham County to the interstate. The project presents opportunities for this study in several ways:

- The Toll Expressway and Effingham Parkway could be linked into a continuous facility.
- The Effingham Parkway project could be coordinated with a new or improved interchange on I-95.
- A completed Parkway will alter the need for or the types of improvements needed on SR 21.