Getting Up to Speed

How Did We Get Here?

The 1940s marked the era of Big Band and big ideas. It was during this period that Indiana transportation planners first suggested an improved highway between Evansville and Indianapolis. Not until the early 1990s would the project see the catalyst it needed to transform from an idea to an interstate. Transportation legislation in the 1990s made the link a national priority as part of a Canada to Mexico interstate highway.

In late 1999, the Tier 1 Environmental Impact Study (EIS) was initiated to analyze in detail a wide range of corridors for I-69 between the two cities. In the beginning of Tier 1 a comprehensive needs analysis using state-of-the-practice technical tools was combined with state and federal policies to help shape the purpose of the project and identify needs. Three major goals emerged:

- Strengthen the transportation network in southwest Indiana;
- Support economic development in southwest Indiana; and,
- Complete the portion of the National I-69 project between Evansville and Indianapolis.

After gathering feedback from businesses, residents, and other interest groups, INDOT designated 5 highway corridors for detailed study. Twelve alternatives were specified within these 5 corridors. Each alternative was analyzed in detail in the Tier 1 EIS, which was released on July 31, 2002. That August citizens had a chance to receive information and give their comments on the alternatives at a series of public hearings. In addition, other comments (by letter, e-mail, and telephone) were received from the public and resource agencies during a comment period which extended from July 31 to November 7, 2002. Over 20,000 comments were received and considered in arriving at a selected corridor. After careful consideration of all the comments, INDOT recommended Alternative 3C be selected as the corridor for I-69 between Evansville and Indianapolis.

In December 2003 a Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for I-69 was issued. The FEIS responded to comments in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) and recommended Alternative 3C as the route that best fulfilled the project purposes. The Federal Highway Administration selected Alternative 3C in its Record of Decision on March 24, 2004, paving the way for the initiation of Tier 2 Studies for I-69.

Where Are We Now?

There are no rest stops on the road to building I-69. In fact, work on the current phase of the project, the I-69 Evansville to Indianapolis Tier 2 Studies, is moving at a quick but coordinated pace.

The corridor, approved by the Federal Highway Administration in March 2004, is approximately 2,000 feet wide. In the current Tier 2 Studies, transportation experts must determine where to place the roughly 400 foot wide interstate highway within the approved corridor.

For the Tier 2 Studies, the corridor is divided into six geographic sections with six separate firms performing engineering assessments and environmental studies. Each firm has a project office within its section of the corridor. The public can visit these offices to learn more about the project and share their thoughts and knowledge of the community. This phase of study relies heavily on public input. In each section Community Advisory Committees have been formed to gather insight on the special interests and needs of local communities. Public Information meetings are also underway to share the first preliminary alternative routes and get community feedback.

Over the next months, results of the engineering and environmental studies will be combined with the insights of the community to help each section make a recommendation on the alignment of I-69 within their region.
Getting to Know You
Citizens have several opportunities to express community interests

Threading a large piece of farm equipment through a narrow underpass can make your spine straight and your knuckles white. It’s just the sort of thing project team members want to be aware of when studying I-69. When people ask questions at a public meeting or stop by a project office to chat, they provide community insight - a valuable component of the Tier 2 Studies.

As part of the project’s comprehensive public involvement plan each of the six sections hosted an open house this summer at their new community offices. More than 1,200 visitors were eager to learn more about the CACs and review the project progress. Comments and questions were taken at the meeting and will be considered as work to identify a preferred alignment continues. Other project sections will hold their first Public Information Meetings early next year.

In addition to a lot of listening, we’ve been doing some talking too. The project team representatives have given interviews or information to the media on more than 60 occasions. We’ve also responded to several requests to speak at gatherings and meetings (see “At Your Service…” on page 4 for details).

If you have information that would be valuable to project representatives there are plenty of options for making your voice heard. You can call or write a project office, join us at one of the public information meetings, or e-mail us by visiting the project’s first Public Information Meeting website.

With the aid of public involvement, project staff has already drawn some preliminary alignments for Section 1 of I-69 (between I-64 and Oakland City). Alternative routes were shared with the community at the section’s first Public Information Meeting.

History Lesson
The Federal government is committed to protecting our nation’s historic properties. According to the National Historical Preservation Act established by Congress in 1966, “the historical and cultural foundations of the Nation should be preserved … in order to give a sense of orientation to the American people”. Section 106 of the act requires Federal agencies to take historic properties into consideration when taking action on a project in which federal funding or permitting is involved.

In the Tier 2 Studies historians are identifying historic properties in an area called “the Area of Potential Effects”. Currently team members may be seen photographing and mapping properties eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. They are also performing an exhaustive search of historical records and conducting interviews with property owners. Individuals and organizations with a demonstrated interest in the project and historic properties (consulting parties) are currently meeting with project team members to provide input on potential historic properties. These studies and meetings will continue through the next months.

Once team members complete their surveys they must evaluate how the project might affect the properties and investigate ways to avoid or minimize harm to the properties. Through Section 106 review the I-69 project members are ensuring that these valued properties will be considered when determining a final alignment for the interstate.
Field Studies Underway

Many environmental experts are literally walking the entire approved I-69 corridor, but this isn’t your average Sunday stroll in the park. Experts from many different and specialized fields are combing the corridor and conducting specialized field surveys to gain a better understanding of the different environmental issues in and near the approved corridor.

Currently each of the six sections is being evaluated for potential impacts to both natural and man-made environments. This includes a rigorous analysis of factors such as social and economic impacts, as well as effects on historical and archaeological resources, endangered or threatened species, wetlands, wildlife, agricultural land, water quality, karst and others.

Relocations are an important criteria in environmental studies. Special attention is placed on studying human environmental impacts, as well as impacts to the natural environment. As part of these studies, wetlands are being thoroughly reviewed. Team members are looking closely at these important and sensitive environments, noting their functions, values, size and quality. In addition, during the summer and fall of 2004, experts netted bats in and around the corridor, taking special note of the presence or absence of the endangered Indiana bat. In some sections fish, mussels, crayfishes, amphibians, reptiles, mammals, birds and plants are being studied. Other sections will begin this type of work in 2005. Another priority for team members is knowing what is going on below ground. Experts are conducting exhaustive research on the area’s caves, springs, sinkholes, and sinking streams. In addition to the biological and geological surveys, experts are locating and researching potential historical properties and known archaeological sites in or near the corridor.

Team members will combine the data collected from these and other studies to prepare the environmental documents for each section. This information will then be used to determine the route that minimizes impact on sensitive environmental areas while maintaining engineering standards and minimizing the cost of the project.

Biologists By Trade, Firefighters By Necessity

Everybody enjoys a little diversity in their work, but fighting fires is the last thing a group of Section 4 biologists with DLZ Indiana expected to do on a late August morning. The DLZ crew was driving through Jackson Township in Greene County on their way to continue fieldwork along the I-69 corridor when something caught their eyes. In a barnyard next to the roadway, a hay wagon loaded with about 100 bales was ablaze and nobody had yet seemed to notice. Without hesitation the crew sprang into action, meeting the owner as he returned from the barn. The crew assisted in hooking up nearby garden hoses to spray the fire. While these hoses lacked the power to save the wagon, the crew’s efforts helped save the farmer’s pick-up truck and adjacent wooden fence. The Jackson Township Fire Department arrived shortly after and extinguished the fire. The landowner was unclear what started the blaze, but was grateful to the DLZ crew for their help in containing the fire.
I-69 Answers
Responses to your most frequently asked questions

Q: How will I-69 reduce highway crashes?

A: I-69 is forecasted to significantly reduce highway crashes. When completed, I-69 is forecasted (over a 20 year period) to result in 40,000 fewer serious injuries from highway crashes. This is equivalent to the entire populations of Bloomfield, Linton, Martinsville, Oakland City, Petersburg, and Washington foregoing a trip to the emergency room. But, how and why will this occur?

Vehicles and travelers using I-69 will be using a highway which is much safer than existing rural highways in southwest Indiana. The safety features of an interstate highway include:

- Elimination of all at-grade intersections
- Passing lanes on all portions of the roadway
- Physical separation of opposing directions of travel
- Wide shoulders

These safety features will provide a much safer trip for drivers. Traveling a given distance on an interstate highway is one-half to one-third as likely to result in a crash, as compared with travel on another type of rural highway. The forecasts of accident crash reduction take into account the millions of miles of travel each year which will occur on I-69, instead of other rural highways.

Let’s Get Technical
Your cheat-sheet of transportation terms

Area of Potential Effect (APE) - An area defined as one mile plus 1,500 feet on either side of the corridor center line, within which the project team members conduct studies associated with identifying historic districts and properties.

Corridor - A band approximately 2,000 feet in width within which a highway could be built. The Federal Highway Administration Record of Decision (ROD), dated March 24, 2004, selected an approved corridor for I-69.

Community Advisory Committee (CAC) - A group of stakeholder representatives within a generalized region brought together during development of a transportation project. CACs serve in an advisory role to INDOT and the Project Team.

Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) - A document prepared for public comment by a government agency that evaluates the impacts of a proposed federal action on the environment. Each of the six sections will complete a DEIS.

Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) - A revised version of the DEIS, reflecting the consideration of public and resource agency input; one for each section.

Preferred Alternative - The alternative that FHWA and INDOT identify in a DEIS or FEIS as their preferred course of action. The final approval of the preferred alternative is granted in the Record of Decision (ROD).

Public Hearing - A formal, required meeting at which a public agency receives public comments on a proposed action. There are specific findings or recommendations upon which people are asked to comment. Public hearings will be held in each section after the DEIS for that section is published.

Public Meeting - A forum for which there is no legal requirement at which the public agency shares current project information and seeks citizen input.

Record of Decision (ROD) - A document prepared by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) that formally concludes a study process. In Tier 2, each section will individually seek a ROD to approve an exact alignment and authorize mitigation measures.

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Stay Informed

There are plenty of ways to get more information about the I-69 Evansville to Indianapolis Tier 2 Studies.

THE WEB - Our website, www.i69indyevn.org, offers articles on the project’s progress, section information, maps of the approved corridor, plus ways to leave comments for the section project managers.

THE HOTLINE - You can dial our hotline at 1-877-463-9386 to hear an update on the project, leave a comment for project representatives, or add your name to our mailing list.

THE MAIL - You can always send us your comments or questions in the mail. Just address your note to the project office in your community.

Corridor Quiz

A: 1944
The Indiana State Highway Commission (predecessor to INDOT) proposed several interstate routes beginning in 1944 in addition to those designated in 1947 as part of the original 40,000 mile national system of interstate highways. (FEIS pg 1-1)

A: 1998, as part of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century. (FEIS pg 1-7)
Corridor Quiz
What year was an Evansville-to-Indianapolis highway first proposed?
When did the US Congress specify that “I-69” should be built between Evansville and Indianapolis?