

memorandum

DATE: September 8, 2009

TO: Michael S. Flad, City Manager

FROM: Greg Herrmann, Interim Community Development Director
via: Michael D. Forbes, Deputy City Planner
by: David L. Kriske, Principal Planner

SUBJECT: Interstate 710 Gap Closure Project First Step Report

PURPOSE:

At the City Council meeting of August 11, 2009, Councilmember Talamantes asked staff to bring back a summary of the Interstate 710 Gap Closure Project. The purpose of this report is to provide background information on recent regional plan and funding discussions related to this proposed freeway extension connecting the current terminus of Interstate 710 in Alhambra with Interstate 210 in Pasadena via an underground tunnel.

BACKGROUND:

Interstate 710, or the Long Beach Freeway, is a primary north-south freeway serving traffic between the cities of Long Beach and Alhambra, built in segments between the early 1950s and the late 1960s. While the freeway currently terminates at Valley Boulevard in the City of Alhambra, regional freeway plans dating back to 1947 have designated an extension of the freeway north to the Interstate 210 / State Route 134 junction in Pasadena. Most historical plans to extend the freeway involved construction of a surface freeway connection, depressed (below-ground) connection, and/or partial cut-and-cover tunnel extending the route generally in a straight, north-south direction between the two existing freeway “stubs” of the current route. A map illustrating the general location of the proposed gap closure is attached (Exhibit A).

Project History

The project has long been supported by the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), who was the primary advocate of the project in the 1970s and 1980s. Later, as regional freeway planning and funding migrated from the state level to the regional level, agencies like the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Metro) and the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) took a more active role in planning efforts. The project is seen by these agencies as having both a local and regional mobility benefit. Locally, the Interstate 710 extension would affect local cities adjacent to the freeway by redirecting cut-through commuter traffic using local surface streets onto the freeway. Regionally, the project would allow traffic travelling along Interstate 710 leaving Southern California to the north (via Interstate 5) to

bypass Downtown Los Angeles, and would allow traffic heading to points east (via Interstate 15) access to Interstate 210, thus relieving other east-west corridors like Interstate 10 and State Route 60. The regional component of Interstate 710 traffic is important because the freeway is the primary conduit for national and international surface freight traffic leaving the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. The Interstate 710 Gap Closure would affect how this freight traffic would flow through the region.

The Interstate 710 freeway extension has been controversial for many decades, and the project has a long history of staunch criticism from community stakeholders in cities like Pasadena and South Pasadena, where the project's alignment would impact many historic residential and commercial neighborhoods. Stakeholders in cities like La Canada-Flintridge and the northern communities of Glendale, who would not be directly impacted by the proposed extension, have also been critical of the proposal due to the effects the facility would have in redirecting more regional freeway traffic to their area. While regional transportation agencies are supportive of the project's regional circulation benefits, the freeway extension also has local support from cities like Alhambra, who currently bear the brunt of local commuter traffic between the two current 710 termini. Local street traffic in that city would be reduced if Interstate 710 were extended, as commute traffic would be redirected onto the proposed freeway.

Caltrans has produced four environmental documents studying the Interstate 710 extension to the Federal Highways Administration (FHWA) over the last 35 years studying the project's environmental impacts as required by federal law. After completion of the most recent document in 1998, FHWA issued a Record of Decision allowing the project to move forward. However, due to significant opposition to the project and disagreement over the findings in the environmental document approved by FHWA, a lawsuit filed by community stakeholders and the City of South Pasadena in the late 1990s resulted in a court injunction that currently governs development of the project. The injunction prohibits the expenditure of state or federal funds for construction or land acquisition (but not design activities) related to the 710 extension. In response to that injunction, FHWA and the California Transportation Commission withdrew their endorsement of Caltrans' environmental document in 2003.

Tunnel Alternative and Recent Studies

In an effort to address community concerns of the Interstate 710 extension and to better mitigate some of the environmental impacts identified in prior studies, Caltrans, Metro, and SCAG began a new planning process in 2003 to explore the feasibility of closing the freeway gap with an underground tunnel connection instead of a conventional surface freeway. Given technological improvements in bore tunnel technology, it was thought that an underground tunnel may be a feasible method to close the Interstate 710 gap while eliminating some of the noise, visual and local air quality impacts to the immediate community. This shift in direction led to production of two new studies reflecting this new approach. In 2006, Metro commissioned the "Route 710 Tunnel Technical Feasibility Assessment Report" (Exhibit B), a feasibility document that explored the physical constraints and regional traffic implications of constructing an underground bore tunnel along five broad alternative alignments between the current Interstate 710 terminus at Valley Boulevard and various points along the Interstate 210 / State Route 134 corridor. This study concluded that tunneling options were physically feasible and that further

soil sampling and geotechnical analysis should be initiated to further explore alignment alternatives. Metro and Caltrans have subsequently begun this geotechnical analysis, which is currently ongoing.

The “I-710 Missing Link Truck Study” (Exhibit C), a second study commissioned by SCAG in 2007, was conducted to better explore the local and regional traffic implications of the Interstate 710 Gap Closure via a tunnel. While the 2006 tunnel study used regional model outputs to help forecast specific traffic volumes for the new facility, the purpose of the SCAG study was to better study the broader local and regional traffic impacts of the connection. This study was released in draft form earlier this year. Because Burbank is influenced by the broader regional effects of the Interstate 710 Gap Closure, the results of this second study are discussed in more detail below.

In addition to these technical studies, as part of its long-range planning, Metro currently proposes that the Interstate 710 Gap Closure Project be included in its revised Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP). This long range plan identifies the transit and highway projects that Metro will pursue over the next 30 years to address mobility issues in the county. Currently, the Interstate 710 Gap Closure is included as a “Tier 1 Unfunded Project,” meaning that the need for the project has been identified but funding has not been secured to complete it. The LRTP is currently being considered for adoption by the Metro Board of directors, with a vote expected in September of this year.

In addition to the policy shift towards exploring a tunnel option to close the Interstate 710 gap, recent regional transportation funding changes have also influenced the direction of the project. Measure R, a half-cent sales tax imposed to fund regional transportation projects, was adopted by county voters in 2008 and has allocated \$780 million towards completion of the project over the next 30 years in the measure’s Expenditure Plan (Exhibit D). While these funds are not sufficient to complete the project (preliminarily estimated to cost \$3.7 billion), this initial funding allows Metro to begin more extensive environmental review and planning investigations. It would also allow Metro to pursue complementary funding for the project, either through federal funds or through development of a public-private partnership arrangement, where construction could be funded through tolls or other alternative revenue streams. Of this \$780 million, approximately \$156 million has been preliminarily programmed to be available over the next 10 years if approved by the Metro Board of Directors. A secured funding commitment for at least a partial design phase would allow a tunnel alternative to advance beyond the conceptual stage. This funding commitment may also elevate the status of the project in the LRTP when it is adopted by the Metro Board of Directors. Because Measure R provides a partial funding stream for the project, it could allow the project to be moved from the “Tier 1 Unfunded” status to become a funded project. This would place the project on a higher priority for future funding.

As a result of these recent developments, the Interstate 710 Gap Closure Project implemented as a bore tunnel is moving forward at the preliminary design level on three fronts. First, geotechnical studies of five broad alternative alignments are being completed in support of a further evaluation of the technical feasibility of a tunnel. Second, a detailed draft traffic analysis of the effects of the gap closure is being reviewed by regional agencies and other project stakeholders, including the City of Burbank. Third, the Metro Board of Directors is in the

process of considering adoption of the LRTP, which would formally identify the project for future funding opportunities and would allow environmental review to resume.

ANALYSIS:

The City of Burbank is not directly affected by the Interstate 710 Gap Closure Project should it be constructed. However due to its relative regional proximity, the overall traffic shifts that may result from its construction may affect facilities such as Interstate 5 that pass through the City, and consequently affect Burbank streets and local air quality. Thus, the City Council may wish to formally adopt a position in favor of or against the project as the project moves forward in the project development process. While the Council may not have an interest in the physical configuration or alignment of the facility, the City would be affected by changes in regional traffic patterns resulting from its completion and would also be affected by any regional transportation finance decisions that would be made to fund the \$3.7 billion project.

SCAG Draft Truck Study

The SCAG draft truck study provides the most comprehensive forecast of how the Interstate 710 gap closure would affect both sub-regional and Burbank-specific freeway and arterial traffic if it were constructed. Using the 2004 version of SCAG's 2030 regional travel demand model, the study compared freeway and arterial street vehicle and truck volumes for major facilities in a broad study area encompassing the western San Gabriel Valley, Pasadena, South Pasadena, Glendale, Burbank, La Canada-Flintridge, and the eastern San Fernando Valley. The study modeled future traffic conditions under three scenarios, including one baseline scenario and two scenarios that include the Interstate 710 gap closure.

The study shows that the Interstate 710 gap closure adds significant north-south capacity to the regional highway network, and reduces traffic on arterial streets and freeways that provide alternatives to the new freeway. In particular, arterials volumes east of State Route 2 and south of State Route 134 decrease with the addition of the gap closure, including arterials in the cities of Pasadena, South Pasadena, Alhambra, San Marino, and other San Gabriel Valley locations. Arterial volumes north of State Route 134, along the northern segment of Interstate 210, and west of State Route 2 in the cities of La Canada-Flintridge, Sunland-Tujunga, and eastern Glendale generally see increased traffic caused by the gap closure. Freeway volumes decrease due to the gap closure along State Route 2, State Route 110, Interstate 5 south of State Route 2, and the eastern portions of Interstate 210, with slight decreases (depending on directionality) along Interstate 10 as well. The gap closure causes large traffic increases on Interstate 210 north of State Route 134 through La Canada-Flintridge as traffic can now use the new Interstate 710 gap closure to access that freeway, which provides a direct connection to Interstate 5 and points north of Los Angeles. The report generally describes the proposed project to be of regional benefit to the transportation system, although it does not provide a detailed description of specific or quantifiable benefits.

Major Study Findings

With regards to local streets and freeways in Burbank, the study provides conflicting conclusions, and staff is still awaiting clarification from the consulting firm that conducted the study to address these conflicts. On one hand, the Interstate 710 gap closure would shift north-south vehicle and truck traffic off of congested Interstate 5 in favor of the new connection via Interstate 210, and certain parts of the study suggest that traffic volumes decrease. However, other parts of the study suggest that while traffic is taken off of Interstate 5, it is replaced by traffic from other facilities that would otherwise use Interstate 5 if it were less congested. Interstate 5 in Burbank is expected to experience significant congestion by 2030 under SCAG's forecasts. It is therefore possible that although the gap closure pulls traffic away from Interstate 5 in Burbank, the large latent demand for travel in the corridor causes that redirected traffic to be replaced by new traffic currently using other routes. Staff will continue to work with the consultant firm to seek clarification on the ambiguous forecasts for Interstate 5 in Burbank to better assess the project's potential impact on Burbank facilities.

In addition to the route-specific traffic shifts described above, the study also predicts an overall increase in vehicle-miles-travelled (VMT) in the study area as a result of the Interstate 710 gap closure, but it does not provide detail on the reason for this VMT increase. On one hand, this increase could be caused by vehicles making longer trips due to the gap closure. This is possible if people are taking longer routes to utilize the new connection. For instance, drivers who normally travel directly through a local, congested arterial in South Pasadena may instead opt to take a longer, less direct trip that takes advantage of the faster, less congested freeway by using the new gap closure. Thus, while overall VMT is increasing, travel speeds and trip times are decreasing, and there is overall less congestion occurring in the study area (resulting in less overall vehicle emissions).

However, it is also possible that the increased VMT could be caused by vehicles outside the study area using the gap closure as a new alternate to other regional routes. In this case, regional travel currently using Interstate 10 and Interstate 15 to leave the region could use the new gap closure to utilize Interstate 710, Interstate 210, and Interstate 5 instead. In this case, the gap closure could be drawing new trips into the subregion from other areas. Increases in VMT could suggest more traffic impacts caused by outside, regional trips are affecting local streets and freeways in the subregion. The study does not clearly identify why this increase in overall subregional VMT is occurring, and this is important to know when evaluating the effects of the gap closure.

A third area of discussion regarding the Interstate 710 gap closure is how construction of a significant roadway improvement might induce more overall traffic within the Los Angeles region as a whole. Investing in a new freeway facility like the proposed gap closure adds more capacity to the system and effectively makes travel cheaper for everyone in the region. Travel becomes cheaper (faster) because, in the short term, the new facility decreases travel times, and makes it easier to travel within the area. However, as travel becomes cheaper (faster), other drivers who were deterred from travelling due to the high congestion costs may now decide to make new trips to take advantage of the new capacity. Thus, over the long term, the new freeway capacity created by the gap closure will likely quickly be filled by new trips that would

normally not have been made. Thus, over the long term, regional freeways may return to the same levels of congestion, even with construction of the gap closure. This condition is especially likely if the new facility is built as a free facility instead of a tolled facility. Unfortunately, it is difficult to predict these induced travel demand effects using current travel demand models. Economic supply and demand concepts are sometimes more helpful in predicting travel behavior changes resulting from large increases in new capacity.

A final point to be considered in evaluating the proposed Interstate 710 gap closure concerns the importance of the entire route as a major freight conduit. A significant portion of current and future congestion on Los Angeles' freeways is caused by the role the region plays in worldwide goods movement. Interstate 710 traffic that connects to other transcontinental interstates like Interstate 5, 10, and 15 carries a significant portion of incoming freight from the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. Construction of an Interstate 710 gap closure will influence which roadway facilities this port traffic will use en route to warehouses, railroad yards, or transcontinental truck routes. While the gap closure may relieve regional truck traffic as it allows this traffic to bypass congested facilities to utilize excess capacity in other areas, the larger problem of regional goods movement and the costs this freight traffic bears on the region's roadways is not substantially addressed with this project.

Funding Considerations and Neighboring Municipal Actions

As discussed above, full funding for the Interstate 710 gap closure has not been secured. Measure R provides \$780 million for initial planning and design, but the balance of the estimated \$3.7 billion has not been identified. Given the large cost of this improvement relative to other highway transportation needs in the region, care should be given to weigh the benefits of this improvement against the myriad other improvements identified in SCAG's Regional Transportation Plan and Metro's LRTP. Efforts to secure funding for this project will invariably need to compete with other projects vying for state and federal funds. Metro has initially discussed non-traditional methods to finance the project should it be approved including investigating public-private partnerships. The large project cost and relative benefit the project may have on the region's mobility versus other transportation needs is another issue that warrants discussion in any evaluation of a possible extension of Interstate 710.

With the release of SCAG's draft truck study earlier this year, two of Burbank's neighboring cities have recently reviewed the Interstate 710 Gap Closure Project. On July 28, 2009, the City of Glendale adopted a resolution opposing the project, and cited the increases in traffic on freeways and arterial streets serving the city as reasons for its opposition. The City of La Canada-Flintridge has also expressed their opposition to the project as well as a list of criticisms of SCAG's draft truck study via a letter to SCAG earlier this summer. These two recent actions are in addition to ongoing opposition to the project by the City of South Pasadena, which also opposes the project and its inclusion in SCAG and Metro transportation plans. South Pasadena filed a lawsuit in 2008 requesting that Metro remove the Interstate 710 Gap Closure Project from the Measure R Expenditure Plan. The City of Pasadena has not taken a formal position on the project at this time.

Possible Council Actions

The Mayor of La Canada-Flintridge has recently asked that Burbank and other cities in the subregion consider taking a formal position on the Interstate 710 Gap Closure Project. Given this request and the preceding background and analysis of the project, the Council may decide to formally adopt a position in favor of, or opposed to the project. While the project's physical construction and proposed alignment does not affect Burbank directly, technical studies suggest that the project would have significant effect on regional highway circulation in Burbank and surrounding cities. Staff has continued to follow this issue, particularly with regard to the findings of the draft truck study recently completed, to determine how the project may affect the subregion as well as the City itself. Staff's review of the truck study suggests that further technical questions related to travel demand and traffic effects of the facility on alternative facilities are likely needed before a decision to implement the project can be made. As discussed above, the biggest questions not answered in the truck study or other studies of the project include:

- What are the specific, quantified regional mobility benefits of the project?
- What effect does the project have on traffic shifts to/from Interstate 5?
- What is the cause of the predicted increased VMT in the subregion due to the project?
- What is the effect of building a new, free freeway facility in a congested region and what is its potential to induce new vehicle trips, especially truck trips?
- How does the project complement or hinder efforts to address regional goods movement?
- What further analysis is needed to account for the regional tradeoffs and benefits of constructing a single expensive freeway connector versus using the funds to build alternative regional transportation improvements?

The Council may wish to take an affirmative position on the project through a Resolution, could take a neutral position pending further study of the proposal, or could direct staff to continue to monitor the progress of the project and any related studies and report back on any new developments. Staff is prepared to receive Council direction as necessary, including preparation of a possible follow-up discussion and Resolution tentatively scheduled for September 29, 2009. In addition, staff will continue to work with SCAG's truck study consultant to get clarification on some of the questions posed above.

FISCAL IMPACT:

Adopting a formal Resolution in support of, or in opposition to the Interstate 710 gap closure, or directing staff to continue monitoring development of the project would not impose a fiscal impact on the current City budget. A regional decision to direct further funding to the project could abstractly affect the availability of future transportation funds available to other regional projects that might have a greater benefit to the City. However, a decision to fund the Interstate 710 gap closure would not directly affect the funding of any current regional projects of interest to the City, such as the Interstate 5 / Empire Interchange Project.

CONCLUSION:

The Interstate 710 Gap Closure would close the link in a major regional freeway and would likely have significant effects on local and regional traffic in the subregion, including freeways and arterials serving the City of Burbank. While the project has been planned for many decades, significant opposition to the project's environmental impacts has prevented the connection from being constructed. A policy change in the early 2000s as the result of a legal injunction against the project has lead Metro, Caltrans, and SCAG to explore a bore tunnel option as a means to close the gap. This policy change resulted in two technical studies that explored the physical feasibility of a tunnel across five broad alignment alternatives, and to further determine the project's effect on traffic both locally and within the broader region. The draft truck study in particular suggests that the gap closure would cause traffic shifts and possible traffic increases on facilities in the City of Burbank, however, staff believes that additional clarification is needed to better describe how the facility affects freeways and arterials in Burbank. Further, the study does not provide detail on the cause of the project's increase in overall VMT in the subregion, and while it suggests the project would have a regional transportation benefit, it does not explicitly identify the benefit. Finally, there are larger transportation issues relating to induced demand, goods movement, and public transportation finance that still need to be addressed in a full evaluation of the proposed project. Based upon the status of the project, the Council may wish to either take an active position on the project or may defer any decision until further study is conducted.

RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends that the City Council consider the above analysis of the Interstate 710 Gap Closure and either direct staff to prepare an appropriate Resolution, continue to monitor the progress of the project, or take other action as appropriate.

EXHIBITS:

- Exhibit A: Interstate 710 Gap Closure Project Location Map
- Exhibit B: Route 710 Tunnel Technical Feasibility Assessment Report Executive Summary
(To conserve resources, Exhibit B is available online at <http://www.burbankusa.com/Modules/ShowDocument.aspx?documentid=3035>)
- Exhibit C: I-710 Missing Link Truck Study Preliminary Draft
(To conserve resources, Exhibit C is available online at <http://www.burbankusa.com/Modules/ShowDocument.aspx?documentid=3034>)
- Exhibit D: Measure R Expenditure Plan