

# **APPENDIX I: INTERSTATE ACCESS MODIFICATION REQUEST NEPA POLICY POINTS**

# Interstate Justification Report Policy Points

Properly managing access to the Interstate System is a critical national interest and has been an important function of the FHWA since the Interstate System was established. The Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) *Policy on Access to the Interstate System (May 22, 2017)* (Policy) describes the justification and documentation necessary to substantiate any proposed changes in access to the Interstate System. More information about FHWA's policy is available at <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/programadmin/fraccess.cfm>. FHWA's Policy is applicable to new or revised points of access to Interstate System segments for which Federal-aid highway funds or other funds administered under title 23 have been used in the past or will be used to develop a project.

The Engineering and Operations Analysis (EOA) consists of eight policy points which are summarized below.

*Policy Point 1: The need being addressed by the request cannot be adequately satisfied by existing interchanges to the Interstate, and/or local roads and streets in the corridor can neither provide the desired access, nor can they be reasonably improved (such as access control along surface streets, improving traffic control, modifying ramp terminals and intersections, adding turn bays or lengthening storage) to satisfactorily accommodate the design-year traffic demands (23 CFR 625.2(a)).*

This EOA is requesting to modify an existing access to I-535 that has deficient traffic operations. Under existing conditions, I-535 connects with US 53, Hammond Avenue, and WIS 35 in Superior in a partial directional interchange that includes a signalized intersection and low-speed loop ramp movements. The prioritized movement through the interchange is direct access between Hammond Avenue and I-535 because those movements are directly accessible without signals or interchange ramps to slow or control traffic.

Several geometric and operational deficiencies are noted in **Appendix E**, the *Purpose and Need Statement Technical Memo* (June 21, 2021). These include:

- Exit from I-535 to Hammond Avenue southbound is direct connection to a city street (Hammond Avenue) with large speed reduction and crash history.
- Tight curve on the I-535 SB exit requires advance deceleration on the mainline lanes of I-535, contributing to crash and congestion concerns.
- Traffic signal that controls the movements to and from US 53 and I-535 does not have enough capacity and this causes delay, queuing, and diversion concerns.

New access to the I-535 is not being requested as part of this EOA. The project includes the proposed construction of a new interchange in Superior that routes I-535 directly to US 53 and includes the following characteristics:

- Provides continuity for US 53 traffic by no longer requiring passing through a controlled intersection.

- Utilizes an offset diamond configuration resulting in only two intersections to serve interchange and local street connections; the new interchange would accommodate existing and anticipated future traffic volumes and patterns.
- Provides local road connections to Hammond Avenue and WIS 35 at new intersections with I-535/US 53 on and off ramps with the following modifications:
  - WIS 35 (3rd Street) would be rerouted from John Avenue to the east intersection of the new interchange.
  - Hammond Avenue would be extended from 5th Street to the west intersection of the new interchange.
- Access closures to US 53 at Grand Avenue, Clough Avenue, and Catlin Avenue.
- Reconstructed local frontages near Cumming Avenue, Baxter Avenue, Weeks Avenue, and Fisher Avenue.
- Addition of turn-lanes on US 53 to North 5<sup>th</sup> Street (improving access to Connors Point).
- Addition of grade separated bike/ped crossing near Grand Avenue

These modifications would address vehicle safety and mobility problems identified in the purpose and need.

Through a thorough analysis of a multitude of geometric concepts, see **Appendix F** for details of these reports, it was determined that vehicle safety and mobility could not adequately be addressed without modifications to the interchange.

One of the concepts analyzed included a “basic improvement.” This would have maintained the loop ramp from I-535 SB but eliminated the traffic signal-controlled intersection between US 53 and I-535 movements. That set of movements would be free flow. In addition, this concept would install a controlled intersection between I-535 and Hammond Avenue, south of the I-535 bridge, to encourage traffic calming and transitional behavior from interstate to local street conditions. While this concept would have improved some of the operational problems for US 53 access to I-535, the steep grades of southbound I-535 and tight loop ramp for access to eastbound US 53 would not have been addressed. This condition currently contributes to crash and congestion concerns as well as leads to “cut through” traffic on local side streets when vehicles want to bypass the congestion in this area. This local neighborhood contains environmental justice populations, as discussed in **Appendix J**, who bear the brunt of the “cut through” traffic. Therefore, this concept was dismissed from further consideration. All further concepts studies involved more substantial modifications to the interchange.

The operational analysis conducted for the project provides confidence that the Build Alternatives would improve operational conditions at the I-535/US 53/Hammond Avenue interchange and surrounding intersection compared to the No Build Alternative. The Build Alternatives can be described with these qualitative mitigations to the concerns identified:

- It would remove and replace the traffic signalized intersection at I-535/US 53, a source of delay and congestion, with higher functioning ramp terminal intersections with either roundabout or traffic signal control.
- It would remove the I-535 southbound exit loop ramp, a source of slowing, congestion, and crash history on I-535 approaching Superior.

- It would allow some motorists that currently avoid the congested movements of the interchange (and would choose local roads in Superior to make their trip) to naturally reroute to US 53, a safer and more efficient route. This would tend to increase safety and operational quality on some local roads in Superior by removing these extra vehicles.

*Policy Point 2: The need being addressed by the request cannot be adequately satisfied by reasonable transportation system management (such as ramp metering, mass transit, and HOV facilities), geometric design, and alternative improvements to the Interstate without the proposed change(s) in access (23 CFR 625.2(a)).*

The need being addressed by this project cannot be adequately satisfied by the use of transportation system management (TSM). The problems with the existing interchange are geometric based rather than capacity induced; meaning, TSM improvements aimed at reducing capacity during peak uses would do little to address fundamental operational problems. Further, the Blatnik Bridge and this interchange are critical links for freight movement to and from the Twin Ports and the region; any limits to freight mobility through the corridor would fail to address vehicle mobility needs of the project.

*Policy Point 3: An operational and safety analysis has concluded that the proposed change in access does not have a significant adverse impact on the safety and operation of the Interstate facility (which includes mainline lanes, existing, new, or modified ramps, ramp intersections with crossroad) or on the local street network based on both the current and the planned future traffic projections. The analysis shall, particularly in urbanized areas, include at least the first adjacent existing or proposed interchange on either side of the proposed change in access (23 CFR 625.2(a), 655.603(d) and 771.111(f)). The crossroads and the local street network, to at least the first major intersection on either side of the proposed change in access, shall be included in this analysis to the extent necessary to fully evaluate the safety and operational impacts that the proposed change in access and other transportation improvements may have on the local street network (23 CFR 625.2(a) and 655.603(d)). Requests for a proposed change in access must include a description and assessment of the impacts and ability of the proposed changes to safely and efficiently collect, distribute and accommodate traffic on the Interstate facility, ramps, intersection of ramps with crossroad, and local street network (23 CFR 625.2(a) and 655.603(d)). Each request must also include a conceptual plan of the type and location of the signs proposed to support each design alternative (23 U.S.C. 109(d) and 23 CFR 655.603(d)).*

See EOA under separate cover.

*Policy Point 4: The proposed access connects to a public road only and will provide for all traffic movements. Less than "full interchanges" may be considered on a case-by-case basis for applications requiring special access for managed lanes (e.g., transit, HOVs, HOT lanes) or park and ride lots. The proposed access will be designed to meet or exceed current standards (23 CFR 625.2(a), 625.4(a)(2), and 655.603(d)).*

See EOA under separate cover.

*Policy Point 5: The proposal considers and is consistent with local and regional land use and transportation plans. Prior to receiving final approval, all requests for new or revised access must be included in an adopted Metropolitan Transportation Plan, in the adopted Statewide or Metropolitan Transportation Improvement*

*Program (STIP or TIP), and the Congestion Management Process within transportation management areas, as appropriate, and as specified in 23 CFR part 450, and the transportation conformity requirements of 40 CFR parts 51 and 93.*

The project is consistent with the following plans (see Section 4.10 of the Environmental Assessment (EA) for more information:

- *Imagine Duluth 2035*
- *City of Superior Comprehensive Plan*
- *St. Louis County Comprehensive Plan*
- *2020-2040 Douglas County Comprehensive Plan*
- *Duluth-Superior Port Land Use Plan*
- *Duluth-Superior Long Range Transportation Plan*

Further, in August 2021 the Metropolitan Interstate Council (the Duluth-Superior area Metropolitan Planning Organization) issued a resolution supporting the Blatnik Bridge Project, citing the importance of the connection, aging infrastructure concerns, and opportunities to leverage federal funding

*Policy Point 6: In corridors where the potential exists for future multiple interchange additions, a comprehensive corridor or network study must accompany all requests for new or revised access with recommendations that address all of the proposed and desired access changes within the context of a longer-range system or network plan (23 U.S.C. 109(d), 23 CFR 625.2(a), 655.603(d), and 771.111).*

Section 4.21.2 of the EA provides reasonably foreseeable future projects near the limits of the Blatnik Bridge Project and detour route based on a current state and local planning documents. There are currently no programmed interchanges within the project area.

*Policy Point 7: When a new or revised access point is due to a new, expanded, or substantial change in current or planned future development or land use, requests must demonstrate appropriate coordination has occurred between the development and any proposed transportation system improvements (23 CFR 625.2(a) and 655.603(d)). The request must describe the commitments agreed upon to assure adequate collection and dispersion of the traffic resulting from the development with the adjoining local street network and Interstate access point (23 CFR 625.2(a) and 655.603(d))*

Based on a review of local and regional comprehensive plans and direct coordination with the communities of Duluth and Superior, there are no major redevelopment planned that may be impacted by the project.

Daily traffic forecasts conducted for the project, generated utilizing the Duluth-Superior Area Travel Demand Model (TDM) in support of the MIC and the *Duluth Superior Metropolitan Area Long Range Transportation Plan*, suggest volumes are relatively flat through 2047. The model aggregates socioeconomic data like housing, employment, and school enrollment that contribute to changes in traffic volumes. See Section 4.20.1.2 of the EA for more info.