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I-69 Study Marks Major Milestone with Final Environmental Impact Statement

INDIANAPOLIS – J. Bryan Nicol, commissioner of the Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT), today announced the completion of the I-69 Evansville to Indianapolis “Final Environmental Impact Statement” (FEIS), which includes \$77 million dedicated to environmental mitigation and enhancement efforts in Southwest Indiana.

“By completing a Final Environmental Impact Statement, we’ve reached another major milestone – a milestone that has never been reached in any previous study for this project,” said Nicol. “We are now closer than ever before to obtaining final approval for a new Interstate that will shave 27 minutes off the travel time between Evansville and Indianapolis, while improving access and safety for communities and businesses throughout Southwest Indiana.”

After nearly four years of comprehensive research, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and INDOT completed the FEIS this month. This document, developed with an unprecedented level of public involvement from citizens and a host of federal and state agencies, is key to obtaining FHWA approval for Indiana’s decision on an I-69 corridor between Evansville and Indianapolis.

Major Steps Taken in 2003 to Advance I-69 Project

On January 9, 2003, the late Gov. Frank O’Bannon announced the preferred corridor for completing I-69 between Evansville and Indianapolis. That route, known as Alternative 3C, connects Evansville to Indianapolis via Washington, Crane Naval Surface Warfare Center, Bloomington and Martinsville.

In the 11 months and nine days since the announcement, FHWA and INDOT have taken major steps to advance the project. These have included:

- Updating and expanding the environmental analysis in the FEIS to address comments submitted by the public and environmental agencies on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS).
- Completion of a memorandum of agreement (MOA) documenting commitments to protect historic and archaeological resources during development of the project.
- Completion of a biological opinion by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regarding the project’s potential effects on threatened or endangered species. In its biological opinion, the Service concluded that the project would not jeopardize the continued existence of any threatened or endangered species.
- Agreement with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on the procedures to be followed for wetlands permitting in subsequent phases of development of the project. As part of this effort, the Corps concurred with INDOT’s selection of Alternative 3C as the corridor for the project.
- Development of a comprehensive \$77 million package of environmental mitigation and enhancement measures.

- Adoption of the preferred corridor for I-69 into the long-range transportation plans for Evansville, Indianapolis, and Bloomington

Unprecedented Natural and Historic Resource Commitments Highlight Document

In partnership with key environmental resource agencies, INDOT has developed plans to mitigate the impact of the Interstate and, where possible, enhance the environment in Southwest Indiana.

“Since we started this study four years ago, our mantra has been, ‘avoid, minimize, and mitigate impacts,’” said Nicol. “The mitigation plans worked out with the environmental agencies will do just that. Since the DEIS, we’ve avoided sensitive areas such as the Prides Creek Wetlands complex of Pike County by shifting the corridor. We have minimized impacts to areas such as the Patoka River Bottoms by committing to bridge over the floodplain as requested by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. And we have committed to a state-of-the-art mitigation package.”

The state-of-the-art mitigation package in the FEIS includes:

- **Forest Mitigation.** For every acre of forest impacted by the project, INDOT will permanently protect three acres of forest land – even though forest mitigation is not required by law. Wherever possible, the newly protected lands will be located adjacent to existing publicly owned tracts. As part of this commitment, INDOT recently agreed to purchase 1,511 acres of land from Indianapolis Power & Light, protecting that land from development and preserving the land in perpetuity.
- **Wetlands Mitigation.** For every acre of fully developed (forested) wetlands impacted by the project, INDOT will create three acres of new wetlands. In the case of newly developing (emergent) wetlands, the replacement ratio will be 2:1. All wetlands mitigation sites will be subject to the approval and oversight of the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and other agencies.
- **Community Planning.** As announced by Gov. Joe Kernan in October, INDOT will fund an innovative \$2 million program to support land use and economic development planning efforts in the cities, towns, and counties affected by I-69. This program will provide both technical and financial assistance to support local planning efforts. Land use and economic planning decisions will continue to be made at the local level.
- **Historic Resource Surveys.** As part of the historic preservation studies for this project, INDOT will fund the updating of historic resource inventories in counties located along the selected corridor. These updated studies will contribute to a better understanding of Indiana’s rich heritage, while also helping to ensure that historic properties are avoided wherever possible in the development of this project.
- **Conservation Measures for Threatened and Endangered Species.** As part of the required consultation process with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, INDOT has committed to carry out an extensive set of conservation measures for the Indiana bat and the bald eagle. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has concluded that, if the committed measures are implemented, “long term habitat conditions for Indiana bat maternity colonies, individuals and hibernating populations within the actions areas may be better than existing conditions.”

“We’re going to continue to seek great opportunities to preserve and enhance the environment in Southwest Indiana.” said Nicol. “Gov. Kernan’s announcement last week that INDOT would buy 1,511 acres of woodland near the Morgan-Monroe State Forest for \$4.5 million accomplished more than 40 percent of our acreage goal, but used only 13 percent of our budget for forest mitigation. And more is yet to come.”

Additional mitigation initiatives include measures such as employing a “Context-sensitive Design” approach to planning and design, developing rest areas and an interpretive center for the public, utilizing local and access roads to maintain accessibility for neighborhoods and businesses, incorporating noise barriers, and establishing historic preservation easements to protect significant historic structures, landscapes and archaeological sites. In addition, wherever possible, the route will follow existing property lines and minimize division of large tracts of farmland.

The environmental mitigation and enhancement initiatives will be refined during the final alignment phase which will determine the specific alignment for the highway within the preferred corridor.

FHWA Approval for Corridor Expected in Early 2004

The publication of the FEIS begins a 47-day period for the public and environmental resource agencies to review the document. This 47-day review period ends on Feb. 2, 2004. After the end of the review period, FHWA and INDOT will review any comments received on the FEIS. It is expected that FHWA will then issue a Record of Decision (ROD) approving the selected corridor, known as 3C. The ROD will include responses to any substantive comments received on the FEIS.

The public may comment on the FEIS through Feb. 2, 2004, by visiting www.i69indyevn.org or by calling the toll-free hotline, 877-INDY-EVN or 877-463-9386. The document is available for download at the project Web site, and it is available at public libraries in the 26-county study area. It also is available on CD-ROM and may be requested by calling the project hotline.

Additional Opportunities for Public Involvement to Follow

Immediately following FHWA approval of the selected corridor, FHWA and INDOT will proceed with the next stage in the development of the project. During this next stage, which is known as "Tier 2," the 142-mile corridor will be broken into six sections. Tier 2 final alignment work also will entail many public meetings and opportunities for local officials and residents along the route to help plan and design the highway that works best for their communities.

During Tier 1, INDOT has taken extraordinary steps to involve the public in each phase of the study and made information about the study widely available. In addition to a project Web site, newsletter, toll-free hotline and other communications tools, more than 200 documented public and stakeholder meetings have been held. This same commitment to public involvement will continue during Tier 2.

Completion of I-69 to Benefit Thousands of Hoosiers

I-69 will serve as an economic development engine for Southwest Indiana and generate \$3.5 billion in additional personal income growth and 4,600 additional permanent jobs by 2025. It also will prevent nearly 40,000 serious injuries and reduce travel time between Indianapolis and Evansville by 27 minutes, saving Hoosiers \$1.1 billion in driver time and vehicle operating costs during the first 20 years on trips between Indianapolis and Evansville alone. It provides an additional 37,000 Hoosiers 30-minute access to major urban areas, where major medical facilities, educational institutions and job opportunities are located. I-69 is estimated to cost \$1.78 billion to build, 80 percent of which will be paid with federal funds.

Complete information on the I-69 Study is available at www.i69indyevn.org.

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