ONEACADIANA

The I-49 Lafayette Connector: Frequently Asked Questions

What is the I-49 Lafayette Connector?

The I-49 Lafayette Connector is a 5.5-mile segment of the future extension of Interstate 49 from Lafayette through South Louisiana to New Orleans. The Connector will cross through the city beginning at the present I-10/I-49 interchange, then follow the Evangeline Thruway/US 90 past the Lafayette Regional Airport to Kaliste Saloom Road.

What are the benefits of the I-49 Lafayette Connector for our community?

Transportation & Mobility Benefits

Locally and regionally the Lafayette Connector will significantly enhance the area's network of arterial roads by improving mobility and access for residents and businesses alike, relieving congestion on our overburdened local road system and improving connectivity across Acadiana.

As a component of the extension of I-49, the project provides a critically needed hurricane evacuation route for the 1+ million residents of South Louisiana while simultaneously expanding the state's highway network with an alternative to the highly congested I-10 route through Baton Rouge to New Orleans. Interstate 49 will ultimately connect New Orleans, South Louisiana, and Acadiana to Winnipeg, Canada, via Kansas City, completing a transportation route of international significance for energy, trade, freight transport, and long-term economic development.

Urban Revitalization Benefits

A well-designed Connector, informed by the needs and aspirations of the community, has the potential to transform the Evangeline Thruway Corridor and improve conditions in Lafayette's urban core and north-side neighborhoods. Leveraging this $1 billion investment with new private investments offers unparalleled opportunities to reconnect the communities divided by the Evangeline Thruway; to resurrect blighted properties and develop community assets in our urban core; to reduce our congested arterial roads while building safe and walkable urban neighborhoods; to address environmental issues that have been neglected for decades; to create a stunning gateway to our community worthy of our vibrant culture; and to expand access for residents and businesses alike to jobs, healthcare, education, and economic opportunities in regional, national, and international markets.

What is the Evangeline Corridor Initiative?

The Evangeline Corridor Initiative (ECI) is a neighborhood-based planning effort that runs parallel with the Lafayette Connector project. While anticipating the impacts and opportunities presented by the Connector, the ECI addresses a broader scope of aspirations and needs in the neighborhoods along the Evangeline Thruway. The ECI entails an intensive grass-roots planning process to identify opportunities for neighborhood betterment beyond those associated with just the Connector. The ECI will produce area plans with clearly defined implementation steps.

ECI is funded by a US Department of Transportation TIGER grant (Transportation Investments Generating Economic Recovery) with matching funds from Lafayette Consolidated Government (LCG). The Evangeline Thruway Redevelopment Team (ETRT) is a volunteer citizens committee appointed by Lafayette City-Parish Council to help steer the ECI process and to advise the City-Parish Council on the plan's content and

implementation. The ECI and ETRT receive staff and technical support from LCG's Department of Planning, Zoning, and Development.

Why does the Connector go through the heart of Lafayette?

The evaluation of alternative corridors for routing the Lafayette Connector was undertaken in the Path to Progress Report in 1993. In addition to the Evangeline Thruway Corridor, a 26.8-mile western bypass, a 16.5 mile-eastern bypass, and a shorter 10.35-mile eastern alternative was considered, along with a "no-build" option. The Evangeline Thruway Corridor was determined the best option to fulfill the full complement of transportation objectives of the project while minimizing its potential environmental impacts.

Following the selection of the Corridor, a range of specific alignments for the highway within the Corridor were developed and subjected to a comprehensive Environmental Impact Study to determine the preferred alignment. That process culminated in the issuance of the Final Environmental Impact Study (FEIS) and the Record of Decision (ROD) affirming the location, outline, and primary features of the Connector. A lawsuit filed in federal court claimed the FEIS/ROD violated provisions of the Department of Transportation Act, the National Environmental Protection Act, and the National Historic Preservation Act. All the claims were rejected and the FEIS/ROD was upheld.

The Connector project now underway entails the development of the Functional Plan and the Design Guidelines Manual for the selected alignment. The next phase of work will entail the physical design and engineering of the Connector and the production of final design and construction documents.

What about the Teche Ridge concept?

The Teche Ridge proposal is a much-expanded version of an eastern bypass traversing approximately 24 miles further east and south through St. Martin Parish. As in the case of the bypass alternatives previously analyzed and rejected, the Teche Ridge would not address the ever-increasing congestion concentrated in Lafayette Parish that impedes regional mobility and connectivity, one of the essential purposes of the Connector project. A Teche Ridge bypass would primarily serve interstate through-traffic which constitutes less than one-third of projected traffic that must be addressed. Additionally, a Teche Ridge bypass poses significant environmental impacts on the Acadian landscape and its sensitive wetlands and the traditional uses and undisturbed natural habitats it supports. A bypass would incent low-density suburban development far into our rural settings while dismissing the opportunity to repair the damage wrought in the urban core of Lafayette and to address the legacy of existing environmental contamination in the Evangeline Thruway Corridor.

Does the Connector threaten the Chicot aquifer?

The Chicot Aquifer is a primary water source for a large portion of Louisiana including Acadiana. The aquifer sits below a layer of earth that varies between 40 and 120 feet deep in Lafayette Parish. This "upper confining layer" has a high clay content that provides separation between surface conditions and the aquifer. The aquifer corresponds to a layer of sand that extends to a depth of 900 feet below the surface. Beneath the freshwater Chicot Aquifer lies the saltwater Evangeline Aquifer.

A portion of the Connector's projected alignment overlays the former railyard where contamination was identified in the EIS. Such contamination is commonly called a brownfield. Concern for the aquifer stems from a fear that construction within the brownfield area could disturb the separation between the aquifer and the contaminants above. Documentation of the nature and extent of the contamination is incomplete, though assessments by the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (LADEQ) have cleared portions of the area for continued industrial use.

The Connector will necessitate engineering strategies and construction methods that do not breach the separation and/or provide an effective barrier to migration. As required by ROD, the design of the Connector must comply with a host of federal and state environmental regulations before permits can be issued for its construction. Brownfield sites are common in urbanized areas, and a wide variety of such

sites have been successfully remediated and returned to productive use. The Connector offers an opportunity to fully assess the legacy of contamination along the Evangeline Thruway Corridor and use the project itself as a catalyst for remediation.

How much will the Connector cost and how will it be funded?

The initial estimate of the Connector's cost is $750 million to $1 billion. More precise estimating will be developed as the alternative refinement concepts are evaluated. As with most large infrastructure projects, the Connector will likely be built in multiple phases that provide affordable and constructible segments of independent utility. Furthermore, building large infrastructure projects in segments is the standard best practice for purposes of phasing construction and accommodating existing traffic.

Historically interstate highway projects have been funded primarily by federal dollars with a smaller contribution of state dollars. At present no appropriation of funds has been made for the Connector's construction. Recently enacted federal legislation authorized $6 billion of new funds for road projects, including priority consideration of freight corridors and "mega-projects" for which the Connector may qualify.

How can I learn more and participate in the process?

The planning of the Lafayette Connector is managed and directed by the LA DOTD and its contracted consultant team, the Lafayette Connector Partners. The project website – www.lafayetteconnector.com – provides comprehensive information about the Connector and includes a Project Library of documents detailing the specifics of the project as it has evolved over time. This is the starting point to learn more about the project.

The site also provides information about the multiple committees of community volunteers and technical specialists that are serving in an advisory capacity to explore the best options for the project. Regular monthly meetings of those committees offer additional opportunities for the public to learn more about the project. Comments may be submitted electronically through the website or in writing at any public meeting.

Additional Resources:

To learn more about the I-49 Lafayette Connector, please visit: www.lafayetteconnector.com, www.i49lafayette.com, or www.oneacadiana.org.