

WOODROW WILSON BRIDGE

The Woodrow Wilson Bridge over the Potomac River was built in 1961 as part of the 66-mile Capital Beltway around Washington. Today, with its western end anchored in the neighborhoods of south Old Town, the Bridge sits at the center of a major controversy that pits the interests of Alexandria against those of neighboring jurisdictions, the states of Maryland and Virginia, and federal highway officials.

At issue are various proposals to replace and expand the existing six-lane bridge at a cost of between \$1.5 and \$2.1 billion. But at stake in the current controversy is more than simply improving traffic flow across the Potomac River. For Alexandria, two recently added high bridge alternatives would have far-reaching effects: a larger, more visually intrusive concrete superstructure in or adjacent to the historic district of Old Town; displaced homes and public parkland; increased noise; and damage to or loss of sensitive wetlands and open space. Because the federal government, which owns the bridge, is willing to pay no more than \$410 million toward its replacement, users of the new facility may be asked to pay tolls to make up the difference. Also, there are as yet no assurances that the City would be represented on the regional authority that will oversee construction and operation of a new bridge/tunnel facility.

Driving efforts to replace the bridge are concerns over the increasing volumes of traffic that have reduced its life expectancy. The bridge carries 160,000-180,000 vehicles each day, more than twice its design capacity. The single most significant factor that led to the increase in bridge traffic was a decision in 1976 by the District of Columbia to abandon plans to build I-95 through Washington, D.C. As a result, traffic was redirected onto the eastern portion of the Beltway and across the Woodrow Wilson Bridge, and the eastern portion of the Capital Beltway was subsequently renamed Interstate 95.

The first proposals to improve or replace the bridge emerged from a 1989 design competition and a 1991 Draft Environmental Impact Study (Draft EIS), both sponsored by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the Virginia and Maryland Departments of Transportation (VDOT and MDOT), and the D.C. Department of Public Works (DCDPW). The Draft EIS, which proposed several 12- to 14-lane bridge and tunnel designs along five basic alignments, met with strong opposition from Alexandria officials because it was done with limited participation of the affected communities and did not

adequately address traffic and safety issues or the environmental impacts.

Responding partly to the City's concerns, the FHWA agreed to include local representatives in the EIS review process leading up to the selection of a preferred alternative. In mid-1992, the Bridge Improvement Study Coordination Committee was formed and it included FHWA, VDOT, MDOT, DCDPW, representatives from the City of Alexandria (then Mayor Patricia Ticer, followed in 1996 by Mayor Donley), Fairfax County, and Prince George's County, Maryland, including State legislators from these jurisdictions (Delegate Marian VanLandingham and Senator Ticer from Alexandria), and the National Park Service. By March 1994, eight citizen and technical subcommittees were formed to review the work of consultants who were assigned to examine engineering design issues, transportation, transit, and HOV facilities, housing and neighborhood impacts, parks and recreation, and environmental impacts. These efforts resulted in a Supplemental Draft EIS being issued in January 1996 that discussed six bridge improvement alternatives and their projected costs.

In March, following two public hearings by the FHWA and another by City Council, Council voted to endorse the concept of a ten-lane tunnel, with the condition that FHWA begin planning for a second Potomac River crossing 10 to 15 miles south of the Beltway. (The full text of City Council's 14-point position is available on the City's Internet Home Page: /city/current_docs/policy/hpwwb.html)

At a weekend retreat in May, the Coordination Committee tried to reach agreement on a preferred alternative that it could recommend to the U.S. Secretary of Transportation. Alexandria's preferred alternative, the 10-lane tunnel, received no support from the other members of the Committee, who instead advanced two alternatives, all with 12 lanes: a 135-foot-tall high bridge and a 135-foot-tall high bridge with a parallel tunnel. Neither of these alternatives were examined in the January Draft EIS, but both were carried forward by the FHWA following the March public hearings. They are discussed in a Second Supplemental Draft EIS issued in late July.

As a result of the various actions by the FHWA and the injection of two new alternatives, City Council has scheduled a public hearing on those issues for Saturday, September 7. FHWA has set a public hearing for September 5 in Alexandria. The Coordinating Committee will meet in early October to select the alternative it will recommend to the Secretary of Transportation.