

Community Context Audit Report

Version 1.0

Potential I-55 Improvements at Airport Road and at IL Route 126/Essington Road

Job No. P-91-130-07



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Executive Summary

1.1 Overview

The purpose of the Community Context Audit (CCA) is to understand the character of the community surrounding the I-55 study corridor. The CCA is vital in the development of the Project Problem Statement and Purpose and Need Statement. The Villages of Romeoville, Bolingbrook and Plainfield along with the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) are using a collaborative approach that involves stakeholders to develop a facility that fits into its surroundings and preserves scenic, aesthetic, historic, and environmental resources while maintaining safety and mobility. Stakeholders are defined as any person, group or organization that has a direct or indirect impact due to the project.

This study is being developed using the principles of Context Sensitive Solutions (CSS) per the IDOT CSS Policy outlined in Chapter 19 of the BDE Manual. CSS is an interdisciplinary approach that seeks effective, multi-modal transportation solutions by working with stakeholders to develop, build, and maintain cost-effective transportation facilities that fit into and reflect the project's surroundings—its “context.” Through early, frequent, and meaningful communication with stakeholders, and a flexible and creative approach to design, the resulting projects should improve safety and mobility for the traveling public, while seeking to preserve and enhance the scenic, economic, historic, and natural qualities of the settings through which they pass.

The CSS approach will provide stakeholders with the tools and information they require to effectively participate in the study process including providing an understanding of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, transportation planning guidelines, design guidelines, and the relationship between transportation issues (needs) and project alternatives. Using the CSS process should provide all interested stakeholders a mechanism to share comments or concerns about transportation objectives and project alternatives, as well as improve the ability of the project team to understand and address concerns raised. This integrated approach to problem solving and decision-making will help build general community agreement on the preferred alternative and promote involvement throughout the study process.

1.2 Methodology

The Community Context Audit is an assessment of five key community context elements including:

- Regional Mobility
- Community Resources
- Transportation Infrastructure
- Economic Development
- Natural Resources

This Community Context Audit has been shaped by comments regarding these five topic areas from various community outreach methods and techniques. Information was obtained primarily through community research, meetings with Villages of Romeoville and Bolingbrook staff, as well as the Community Advisory Group (CAG), Project Study Group (PSG), and the general public through the community context audit forms, the public meeting and comments received from stakeholders.

Demographic data was obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

Key Findings

Key regional mobility considerations:

- Existing congestion and travel delays
- Safety concerns at existing interchanges
- Better access for emergency responders is desired
- Travel north and south can be difficult due to congestion at the interchanges.
- More access to I-55 within the study area has been expressed by many.

Key community resources:

- Recreational Areas – Ready Set Ride Therapeutic Recreation Facility, Avery Preserve, Four Seasons Park, Weslake Park West and other local parks
- Hickory Hills Rod & Gun Club, Deer Creek Recreation Club and Oak Park Sportsman Club
- Natural Areas – Lake Renwick Heron Preserve, Lake Mary, Lily Cache Creek and others
- Residential neighborhoods and communities
- Schools
- Historic districts, homes and farms

Key infrastructure features and considerations:

- Existing congestion and travel delays
- Improve pedestrian mobility and safety by adding/improving sidewalks and multi-use paths
- The community is concerned about impact of increased traffic on local roadways

Key economic development concerns:

- Better access promotes economic development
- Reduction in congestion promotes business development
- Interchange improvements may create negative and positive changes to property values

- Access improvements may allow for bigger/more companies into the community and provide a larger tax base

Some key natural resources:

- Lake Renwick Heron Rookery
- Lily Cache Creek and Slough
- Avery Preserve
- Lake Mary
- Native wildlife
- Existing wetlands and lakes

Key natural resource concerns:

- Possible noise, light, air and water pollution
- Destruction of native habitat and displacement of wildlife
- Increased flooding, adverse impact on hydrology
- Possible contamination from existing sportsman's parks

Community Context Audit

2.1 Project Overview

The project is located in northwest Will County and is situated within the Villages of Romeoville, Bolingbrook and Plainfield and unincorporated Will County. The study area is located along a six-mile section of I-55 between existing interchanges at US Route 30 and Weber Road. The study limits are three and one-half miles in length and extend from one-half mile south of Airport Road to one mile north of IL 126. Other communities located within the regional area of the study include Crest Hill and Joliet.

I-55 is a full access controlled north-south interstate freeway linking Chicago with the southwest suburbs and downstate Illinois. At present, there are no full access interchanges to I-55 between US Route 30 and Weber Road. Airport Road crosses over I-55 and IL 126 connects to I-55 with a one-way northbound on-ramp and a one-way southbound off-ramp. Within the study area there are frontage roads that connect 143rd Street and Airport Road on both sides of I-55 and a frontage road that connects Airport Road and Renwick Road on the east side of I-55.

The potential improvements are anticipated to address traffic congestion concerns within the Villages of Romeoville, Bolingbrook and Plainfield due to area growth and to improve available access to I-55 within the project study area that would promote economic development and employment growth.

2.2 Regional Context

Will County is one of the fastest growing counties in Illinois and is the tenth fastest growing county in the nation. The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) projects that Will County's population will grow to over 1.1 million by 2030. The Villages of Romeoville, Bolingbrook and Plainfield are also projected by CMAP to have significant population and employment growth over the next thirty years. As noted in Tables 1 and 2, between the three villages, population is projected to grow by 66% and employment is projected to grow by 53%. The growth in the area will cause increased traffic volumes on the area's roadway network and an increase in access demand to and from study area interchanges with I-55.

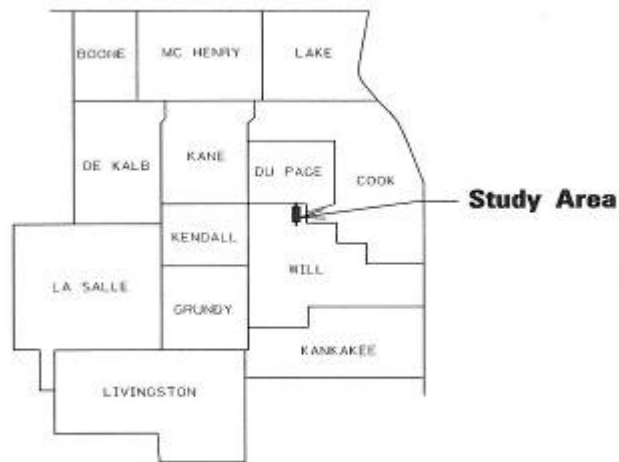
**Table 1
Population Growth**

| POPULATION | 2010 | 2040 | % CHANGE |
|-------------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Romeoville | 76,216 | 116,463 | 53% |
| Bolingbrook | 37,720 | 82,490 | 119% |
| Plainfield | 50,634 | 74,068 | 46% |
| Total | 164,570 | 273,021 | 66% |

**Table 2
Employment Growth**

| EMPLOYMENT | 2010 | 2040 | % CHANGE |
|-------------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Romeoville | 23,417 | 30,166 | 29% |
| Bolingbrook | 14,144 | 23,464 | 66% |
| Plainfield | 17,900 | 31,468 | 76% |
| Total | 55,461 | 85,098 | 53% |

Land use adjacent to the study area varies within the corridor along I-55. East of the IL 126 interchange and at the Weber Road interchange, land use consists of commercial, warehouse and industrial uses on both sides of the interstate. At the IL 126 interchange and south to the US 30 interchange, land use is primarily residential, business, agricultural and public lands. Adjacent to the US 30 interchange, land use is primarily commercial.



LOCATION OF SECTION
INDICATED THUS: →

**Exhibit 1
Vicinity Map
I-55 Study Area**

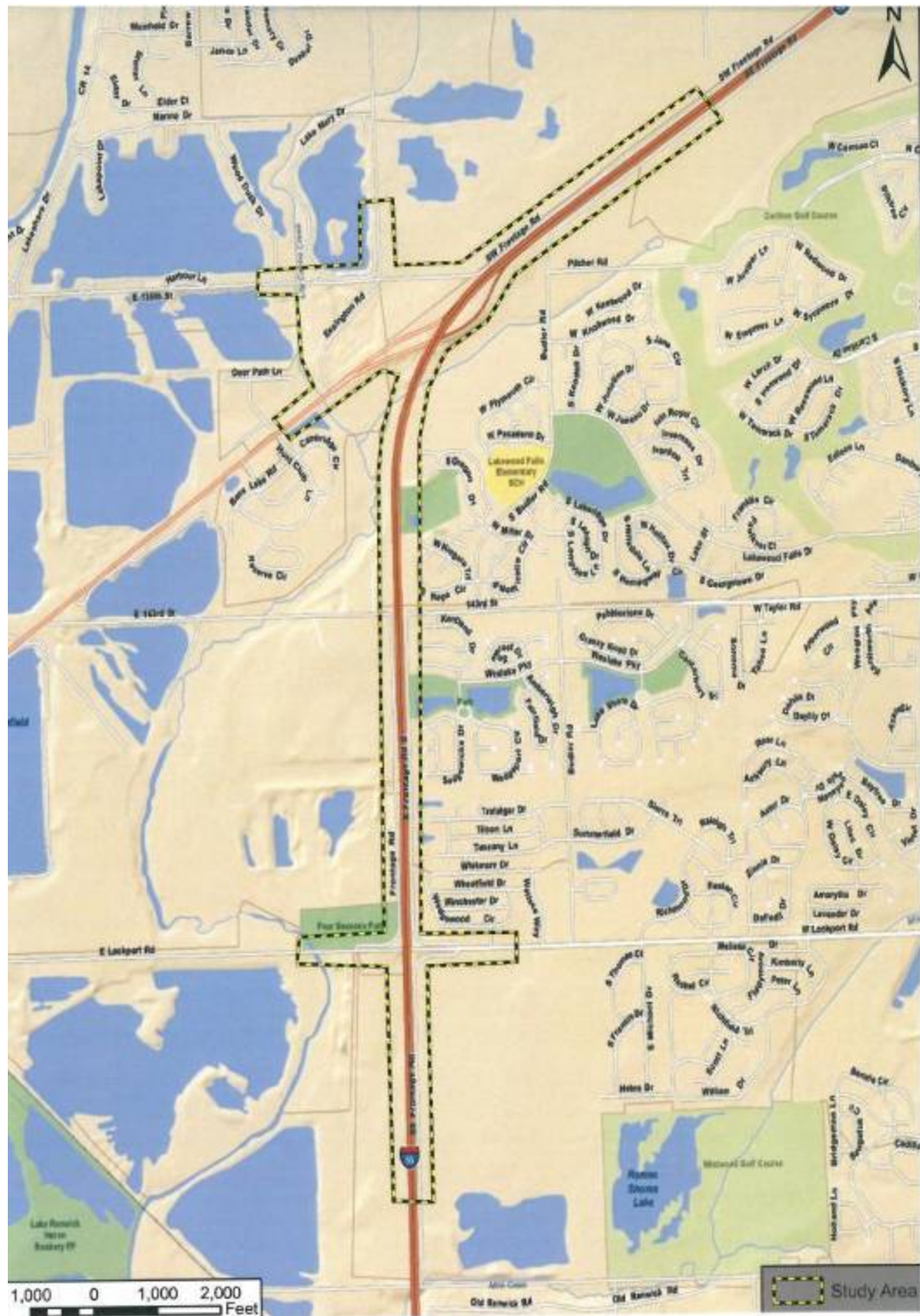


Exhibit 2
Study Limits Map
Potential I-55 Improvements

Community Context Elements

I-55 is a vital expressway in the region. The following categories are elements identified as significant in the CSS project process for the potential I-55 improvements study.

- Regional Mobility
- Community Resources
- Transportation Infrastructure
- Economic Development
- Natural Resources

3.1 Regional Mobility

As a principal arterial system, I-55 serves as a transportation corridor through Illinois and for the communities of Romeoville, Bolingbrook and Plainfield. It is a regional route that connects to other Northeastern Illinois interstate highways. I-55 travels through Illinois to the St. Louis, Missouri metropolitan area and eventually ends at New Orleans, Louisiana.

Key regional transportation concerns were revealed by the Community Advisory Group discussions, public comments and context audit surveys received. Key points were identified as:

- Existing congestion was noted at the I-55 interchanges with Weber Road, IL 126 and Essington Road and to a lesser extent US Route 30. Congestion along I-55 was also experienced.
- Users expressed safety concerns most frequently at the Weber Road interchange followed by the interchanges at IL 126/Essington and US Route 30. Some reported that accidents at these locations can shutdown local traffic and have negative effects on local businesses, residents and commuters.
- Better access for emergency responders is desired.
- It was noted that travel north and south can be difficult due to congestion at the interchanges.
- A desire for more access to I-55 within the study area has been expressed by many.
- Respondents varied on the preferred location of potential interchange improvements but some respondents felt that they would benefit from a full access interchange at 143rd Street, Airport Road and at IL 126/Essington Road.
- The clear majority of CAG participants at the first CAG meeting agreed that interchange improvements were needed within the study area for improved regional mobility.
- Recently added I-55 lanes did not solve all mobility/congestion problems associated with the existing roadway network.

Congestion

Projected 2040 traffic volumes for I-55 have been developed by CMAP and show a significant increase from 2010 traffic volumes. Table 4 provides the existing and projected traffic on I-55 in the roadway segment between US Route 30 and Weber Road.

**Table 3
Projected I-55 Average Daily Traffic**

| I-55 SEGMENT | 2010 ADT | 2040 ADT | % INCREASE |
|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| South of US 30 | 74,000 | 94,000 | 27% |
| South of IL 126 | 75,000 | 98,000 | 31% |
| North of IL 126 | 98,000 | 134,000 | 37% |
| North of Weber Road | 136,100 | 150,000 | 10% |

As part of the draft Access Justification Reports prepared on behalf of the Village of Romeoville for Airport Road and the Village of Bolingbrook for IL 126/Essington Road in 2008, capacity analyses were conducted to determine the level of service that would be expected at each ramp intersection providing access to I-55 using 2030 traffic projections provided by CMAP. With 2040 traffic volumes now available, capacity analyses will be updated as part of this study but currently have not been completed. In reviewing the results of the 2008 analysis of 2030 traffic projections, the level of service projected for the “No Build “ alternative (i.e. no improvements at the existing interchanges located at US 30, IL 126 and Weber Road) and a “Weber Road Only Interchange Improvement” alternative showed little improvement in the level of service and delay. Table 5 provides the results of capacity analyses for 2030 traffic conditions.

**Table 4
Ramp Intersection Level of Service**

| NORTHBOUND | | | |
|-----------------------------|----------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| Interchange Location | | No Build | Weber Rd. Only |
| Weber Road | Exit | C | C |
| | Entrance | D | D |
| IL 126 | Entrance | F | F |
| US 30 | Exit | C | C |
| | Entrance | D | D |
| SOUTHBOUND | | | |
| Interchange Location | | No Build | Weber Rd. Only |
| Weber Road | Exit | D | D |
| | Entrance | F | F |
| IL 126 | Exit | F | F |
| US 30 | Exit | D | D |
| | Entrance | D | D |

The analysis demonstrates that using 2030 projected average daily traffic, an acceptable level of service will not be achieved at either the Weber Road or IL 126 interchanges even if the Weber Road interchange is improved. Providing additional access to I-55 will alleviate traffic congestion at the existing interchanges and will benefit traffic safety on routes that feed into the interchanges by improving traffic flow and emergency vehicle access. Adding another access within the six-mile length of I-55 between US 30 and Weber Road for a southbound entrance to I-55 and for a northbound exit from I-55 should also serve to reduce traffic that concentrates at US 30 and Weber Road. Additional access improvements are needed to serve the traffic demand that currently exists and the projected traffic that is expected in the future.

3.2 Community Resources

As part of the first Community Advisory Group participants were asked to identify community resources that should be valued during the study process. These responses were coupled with the comments received as part as the first public informational meetings and the results of the Community Context Audit to develop a partial list of important community resources to be considered. The list contains both physical properties as well as intangible qualities of the community.

Public and Private Recreational Areas

There are many public parks and private recreational areas in addition to the natural areas fronting the right of way of I-55, IL 126, Essington Road, 143rd Street and Airport Road/Lockport Road within the study area. These include the following:

- Lake Renwick Heron Rookery and Preserve, a Forest Preserve District of Will County area and Avery Preserve and Four Seasons Park, Plainfield Township Park District facilities, located on the south and north sides of Lockport Road west of I-55
- Hickory Hills Rod & Gun Club, a private club, located on the northwest corner of IL 126 and Essington Road
- Deer Creek Recreation Club, a private club, located on the south side of 143rd Street west of I-55
- Oak Park Sportsman Club, a private club, located on the frontage road west of I-55 midway between Lockport Road and 143rd Street
- Weslake Park West, a public park located east of the frontage road and south of 143rd Street

Also noted in the vicinity of the IL 126/Essington Road interchange is the Ready Set Ride Therapeutic Recreation Facility located at 13056 Essington Road.

Community Values

Another important consideration presented was the community feel of neighborhoods, most notably in the vicinity of the IL 126 interchange. Residents cited the tranquility,

neighborhood identity, safety and quality of life as important factors that should be considered as the study moves forward. Included in those factors are the scenic and environmental resources of the communities.

Schools

There are several schools located near the IL 126 interchange. These schools include:

- Liberty Elementary
- Bess Eichelberger Elementary
- John F. Kennedy Middle
- Plainfield High School

3.3 Infrastructure Features

I-55 is a principal arterial system for north-south travel through the Chicago region. Any interchange improvements will affect the local infrastructure features of the surrounding communities. Those features will be considered and evaluated during this Phase 1 study process.

Pedestrian Mobility

Based on the results of the Community Context Audit and comments received, the infrastructure feature that rated the highest level of importance was pedestrian safety and mobility. Requests were made for sidewalks along Airport Road, Essington Road, 135th Street, and Pilcher Avenue. Stakeholders cited concerns over safe routes for school children, joggers and bicyclists. Some respondents expressed a desire for pedestrian/bicycle access across I-55. A smaller percentage of surveys asked that sidewalks not be added to preserve the more natural feel of the area.

Impact to Local Roadways

Stakeholders did express concerns that an interchange would increase traffic along local roadways and direct more vehicles through residential neighborhoods, natural areas and downtown Plainfield. A common concern was increased truck traffic at each potential interchange improvement location. Currently there is no truck traffic allowed along Essington Road.

As part of the community context audit form community members were asked to evaluate existing infrastructure features. The features that were rated with the highest level of importance in descending order were sidewalks, traffic signals, pedestrian accommodations, bicycle lanes/multi-use paths and ADA accessibility. Rated with the lowest importance were bus service and commuter train service.

3.4 Economic Development

The purpose of this section is to identify relevant community development and economic indicators for the study area and pertinent information. Given the decline in the overall economy, the Villages of Romeoville, Bolingbrook and Plainfield have indicated the economic down turn has had an impact on their community. Some families are experiencing the loss of employment and foreclosures. Economic growth is important for the viability of the area.

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) projects that population and employment will grow by 66% and 53% respectively by 2040 in the three communities. This growth will not only mean more traffic demand from new residents that live the area but also more commuters driving to the area for employment opportunities. Part of what will encourage this growth, particularly for job creation, will be the adequacy of the transportation system. Members of the Community Advisory Group already report that the area's roadway network and the interchanges providing access to I-55 are heavily congested under current traffic volumes. This congestion is occurring even with the slowdown in economic activity since 2008 and the 14.7% vacancy rate reported for the first quarter of 2011 by Crain's Chicago Business for industrial properties in the I-55 corridor.

Key economic development considerations as identified by the community:

- Better access promotes economic development
- Reduction in congestion promotes business development
- Interchange improvements may create negative and positive changes to property values
- Access improvements may allow for bigger/more companies into the community and provide a larger tax base

3.5 Natural Resources

The study area is rich in natural resources. Comments received after the first Public Informational Meeting and from CAG participants indicated that these resources are very important to stakeholders.

Some of the key natural resources in the area include:

- Lake Renwick Heron Rookery
- Lily Cache Creek and Slough
- Avery Preserve
- Lake Mary
- Native wildlife
- Existing wetlands and lakes

Community members did express concerns that some interchange improvements may adversely impact the natural resources. Some of the concerns identified by the community:

- Possible noise, light, air and water pollution
- Destruction of native habitat and displacement of wildlife
- Increased flooding, adverse impact on hydrology
- Possible contamination from existing sportsman's parks

Planned Transportation Projects

There are two transportation projects in the area that will be considered during this Phase 1 study. The first is the Phase 1 study of eastward extension of 143rd Street in Plainfield and the second is the Phase 1 study of the Weber Road interchange.

The 143rd Street project in Plainfield would connect 143rd Street from IL Route 59 to IL 126. It would include two lanes in each direction with intersections at Route 59, Plainfield-Naperville Road and Route 126. A new bridge would be constructed over the DuPage River and associated floodplain.

The Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) has begun an Environmental Assessment of possible improvements to the I-55 interchange at Weber Road. Based on the study findings improvements will likely be made at that interchange.

Conclusion

The information obtained in the Community Context Audit (CCA) will be used by the project team throughout the project development process. The CCA is essential in defining the key community characteristics that are instrumental in the CSS process and in evaluating potential alternatives.

The clear majority of responses from the community indicate that interchange improvements are needed within the study area to relieve existing congestion and travel delays and to plan for projected population growth and economic development.

Of utmost importance to the community members, business owners and representatives from the Villages is maintaining the community and natural resources while promoting economic development. Safety for motorists, cyclists and pedestrians is also important to stakeholders. This includes potential improvements with sidewalks and multi-use paths.

This input is now a part of the project development process. With it, the CSS process can continue to evaluate the effects that any I-55 interchange improvements may have on the community as well as assisting in identifying interchange alternatives.