CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Where is the project located?

The proposed State Route (SR) 3 Belfair Bypass project (Bypass) would be constructed to direct regional through traffic around the town of Belfair. The major portion of the highway would run through Mason County and the northern end would be in Kitsap County. The proposed alignment diverges from existing SR 3 at milepost (MP) 22.81, running parallel 3,000 feet to the east until it reconnects with existing SR 3 at MP 29.49. See Exhibit 1-1, Vicinity Map. The proposed bypass highway carries through traffic and would be the main line SR 3. The existing SR 3 will become a business loop serving downtown Belfair and a connection to SR 106, SR 300, and the Old Belfair Highway.

How do we use the project purpose and need?

The project purpose describes the project improvements or what we are proposing to do.

The project need is the why we are doing the work.

The review of the project purpose and need allows the decision maker to judge that these improvements are a prudent expenditure of public funds.

1.2 What is the Belfair Bypass project?

The Belfair Bypass Build Alternative would construct a two-lane limited access highway with a design speed of 60 mph on a new alignment to the east of existing SR 3. The proposed bypass highway would carry regional, through traffic from Shelton to Bremerton and would be the main line State Route 3. The proposed alignment would begin at MP 22.81 on SR 3 and connect back at MP 29.49. An intersection in the vicinity of Alta Road (MP 23.79) is included as an element of the project.

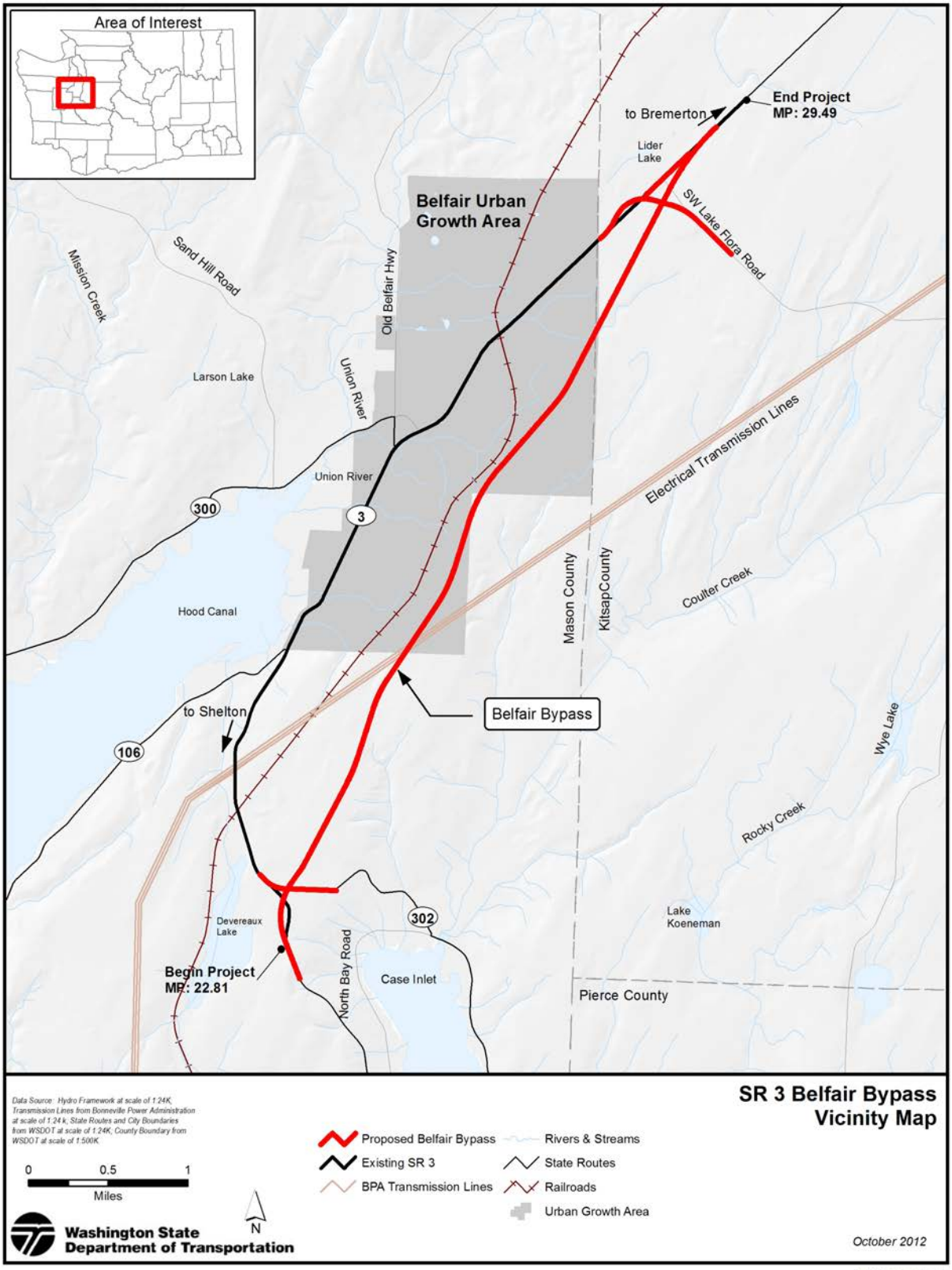
1.3 What is the purpose of this project?

The purpose of constructing a bypass around the Belfair urban area is to provide a reliable high speed regional route between Kitsap and Mason Counties. The Bypass project proposes moving regional traffic

between Shelton and Bremerton in a manner that bypasses the town of Belfair. It also reduces congestion and improves safety through Belfair, and provides an alternate route during recurring highway closures resulting from vehicular accidents. Implementation of this project would provide safe and reliable regional access to jobs, goods and services, improve efficiencies for all public service providers, and lower the current accident rate on SR 3 through Belfair.

The proposed Bypass would provide a solution to the immediate and long-range regional transportation mobility and safety needs of the SR 3 corridor in northeast Mason and southwest Kitsap Counties. The completed project provides for a two-lane highway on a new alignment with the proposed design speed of 60 miles per hour moving regional traffic from Shelton to Bremerton through Belfair. This ensures efficient movement of freight, commute trips between Kitsap and Mason Counties, accommodates seasonal influxes of tourist traffic, and serves general traffic needs through to the design year 2035.

Exhibit 1-1: Vicinity Map



1.4 What conditions are driving the need for this project? How will the proposed action fit into the system linkage?

A bypass around Belfair is needed in order to improve regional mobility, increase capacity, reduce congestion through Belfair, and improve safety.

Regional Mobility

SR 3 is a designated National Highway System route extending from the Hood Canal Bridge in the north to Shelton in the south, passing through the Belfair urban area, the City of Bremerton, the South Kitsap Industrial Area, and connecting with SR 16. SR 3 in the Belfair urban area experiences declining operational Levels of Service (LOS) for traffic and chronic traffic congestion. Because SR 3 is the major north-south link between Mason and Kitsap counties, Belfair is a choke point on this regional highway that serves as the only freight route through southwest Kitsap and northeast Mason Counties.

Level of Service (LOS) is a measure used to analyze highways by categorizing traffic flow with corresponding safe driving conditions. LOS letters designate each level of roadway service from A to F. LOS A represents the best operating conditions. LOS F is the worst conditions that result in more travel time delays.

SR 3 carries most of the daily commute trips from SR 106, SR 300 and populated coastal areas in Mason County north to Bremerton and via SR 16 to points in Pierce and King Counties. Regional traffic using SR 3 must pass through the commercial area of Belfair having numerous access points with high turning volumes. Southbound traffic destined for Shelton, Grays Harbor, and Olympia also must pass through Belfair.

Level of Service

SR 3 is a Highway of Statewide Significance and a National Highway System designated route and had up to 19,000 annual average daily vehicles per day in 2010 through Belfair. A combination of freight, commute, and recreational traffic volumes cause severe commute hour congestion through the Belfair urban area.

Highway LOS analysis shows that the SR 3 mainline segment from SR 302 to SR 106 is LOS D; from SR 106 to NE Clifton Lane, LOS D; and from NE Clifton Lane to Lake Flora Road, it is LOS E. There are currently unsignalized intersections at, or approaching failing operating conditions. If no action is taken, travel times in the project area will continue to worsen as future traffic volumes increase. It will be at LOS E and F in year 2035.

Congestion is occurring during peak commute hours, weekends, holidays, and during the tourist season. Traffic projections show that without a bypass for regional through traffic, operational levels of service on the portion of existing SR 3 through Belfair will continue to decline to the point of chronic failure. Several studies conducted over the last decade have demonstrated that traffic congestion and safety concerns will eventually overwhelm SR 3 in the approaching years.

Collision Data

Results show that several locations on SR 3 in Belfair experience accident rates higher than the statewide average for this type of facility. The overall collision rate on SR 3 between MP 22.81 and MP 29.49 is 2.67 collisions per million vehicle miles. This is higher than the 2009 statewide average collision rate of 0.95 for rural principal arterials. Collision records indicate that the type and severity of collisions appear to be consistent with urban congested traffic.

Regional System Linkage

The current highway does not support regional transportation needs. This route experiences seasonal fluctuations from tourist traffic and recreational users and is the most direct and expedient alternate land route for traffic from Bremerton to Interstate 5 if SR 16 or the Tacoma Narrows Bridge becomes blocked. Southbound traffic destined for Shelton, Grays Harbor, and Olympia must pass through Belfair. As land located in the corridor continues to be developed, and regional trips continue to increase, traffic congestion through Belfair will be exacerbated. The Bremerton Economic Development (BED) Study for US 101, SR 3 and SR 16 in Mason and Kitsap Counties provides the long range, corridor vision (WSDOT 2012a). The BED Study shows that the Belfair Bypass is the top priority project for the local communities and stake holders.

If the SR Belfair Bypass project is not built (No Build Alternative), SR 3 will be an important regional facility that will fail to provide efficient regional and local traffic mobility. The operational analysis of the project area indicates that the roadway currently operates below minimum acceptable service standards on this portion of the highway. Operating conditions will reach failing conditions by 2035. A bypass would improve the roadway system around Belfair and would reduce travel time.

Support of Local Plans

The area is developing based on local agency comprehensive plans and zoning. However, the area lacks a completed transportation network appropriate for the community. Many traffic studies show that a SR 3 bypass around Belfair is needed in order to improve regional mobility, reduce congestion through Belfair, and improve safety. As already discussed, the BED Study shows that the SR 3 Belfair Bypass is the top priority project for the local communities and stake holders. The Bypass has been included in the transportation element of the Mason County comprehensive plans since April 1996.

1.5 What is the planning history of the SR 3 Belfair Bypass project?

This portion of existing SR 3 was originally constructed in 1919 as a county road. In 1955, this portion of the roadway was added to the old Secondary State Highway (SSH) System 14-A. The current state highway system was posted in January 1964; the Shelton to Belfair portion of SSH 14-A became SR 3.

For the most part, SR 3 is a two-lane roadway with three to six foot shoulders and the addition of a two-way turn lane from milepost 26.09 to 26.86.

The need for highway improvements on a new roadway alignment in northeast Mason County to improve mobility and capacity was identified in the *WSDOT Reconnaissance Study* in 1966 and in the 20-year *State Highway System Plan* in 1998. Mason County prepared the feasibility study to determine the best way of providing a better and safer flow of freight and goods, and people between SR 101 at Shelton and Belfair and beyond to Bremerton. The study identified the need for a Belfair bypass.

In September 2000, traffic analysis for a Belfair bypass was performed by Transpo, a consultant for WSDOT. Skillings Connolly, a Mason County consultant, performed a transportation discipline study in 2001 and concluded that existing SR 3 will be unable to accommodate future traffic volume at an acceptable LOS. It was determined that a Belfair bypass would provide an acceptable LOS.

In November 2001, Mason County published the *Mason County Belfair Bypass Environmental Assessment* (EA) and proposed a bypass as an undivided two-lane principal arterial with a design speed of 60 mph. The report concluded that the Belfair Bypass provides a logical solution to reduce traffic congestion in Belfair. The EA was signed by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and circulated in November 2001. Because of public opposition and legal challenges, FHWA did not issue a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the project.

In 2005, the Legislature provided WSDOT funding to complete the environmental review process, providing preliminary design and contract plans for the construction of the SR 3 Belfair Bypass project. The funding was rescinded in June 2009. WSDOT worked on this project for over three years conducting traffic studies and performing other design activities. The preliminary design was finalized and presented to agencies and the public. In 2007, WSDOT conducted three open houses to gather information from the public and present the preliminary alignment and chosen alternatives for the end connections along with a cost estimate for the alternative scenarios. Also during this period, WSDOT field surveyed the entire corridor and the environmental discipline studies were initiated.

The *Belfair Bypass Summary Report* was prepared in June 2009. The total cost estimate was determined to be $78 million in 2009 dollars. In the 2009 transportation budget, the Legislature included a proviso directing WSDOT to engage the public to consider the scope and budget of the SR 3 Belfair Bypass project. The *Belfair Bypass Proviso Report* (2010) was published on June 23, 2010. This study can be viewed at: http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/projects/SR3/SR3BelfairBypassEnvironmentalAssessment/

The Legislature again provided $750,000 in the 2010 supplemental budget to advance work related to environmental review. This current effort focuses solely on delivery of required National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documentation.

1.6 What are the project termini and why are they logical?

FHWA has developed general criteria that must be met in the selection of logical termini for a transportation project that has independent utility. FHWA concluded that this project has logical termini and independent utility.

The Bypass starts and ends at junctions of SR 3. This project has independent utility and will not restrict consideration of alternatives for other reasonably foreseeable transportation improvements.

Logical Termini are rational end points for the environmental analysis.

It allows us to treat environmental issues on a sufficiently broad scope to ensure that the project will function properly without requiring additional improvements elsewhere. In highway talk, we say that it has independent utility.

It does not restrict consideration of other foreseeable transportation improvements.

1.7 Will this project accomplish the overall need of State Route 3?

The Bypass has been extensively studied over the last twelve years and in depth analysis was done while selecting the preliminary alignment and alternatives. It was determined that a two-lane bypass with no mid-point connection between the bypass and SR 3 will serve most of the needs of the project. A bypass around Belfair is needed in order to improve regional mobility, reduce congestion through Belfair, and improve safety. Certain other measures need to be taken on SR 3 to improve safety and congestion in the City of Belfair.

Another improvement project, SR 3 Belfair Area Widening and Safety Improvement project, will construct a two-way left turn lane on existing SR 3 in Belfair. The northern half, Stage 1, of this project is currently funded and scheduled to begin construction in September 2013.

This segment of SR 3 has primarily urban characteristics with retail and commercial trip generators located in the vicinity of NE Clifton Lane and SR 3. There are currently two intersections that do not meet the WSDOT criteria of LOS for the PM peak commute period. They are SR 3 at NE Belfair Street and SR 3 at NE Old Belfair Highway. Both of these locations are unsignalized. A bypass will not be fully able to remedy this without additional intersection improvements.

1.8 Who is the project proponent and lead agency?

The Federal Highway Administration is the lead agency for the NEPA environmental process. The Washington State Department of Transportation is a co-lead agency. Both are involved with roadway design guidance and environmental review oversight.

The primary function of this environmental assessment (EA) is to help the lead agencies make a series of informed decisions on the proposed project. These decisions will be made after thoughtful consideration of input from the public, other agencies, and concerned tribes.

1.9 Why was the EA environmental document chosen?

WSDOT and FHWA determined that an EA is the appropriate level of environmental documentation.

The initial analysis of the level of effect on the various natural and man-made resources showed that studies were needed to find out if any project impacts may be determined to be significant.

One of the purposes of this EA is to identify the level of significance of the project impacts. We want to identify environmental effects and appropriate mitigation measures. The issuance of this EA and the interaction with the public, agencies, and tribes will allow the FHWA to determine the significance of the project impacts on the environment.

What is an environmental assessment?

Under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), an Environmental Assessment (EA) is prepared when project effects are not known without examining technical studies to judge the magnitude of these environmental effects. The decision document can be a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) or an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The EA can also decide on the Proposed Action or the No Action Alternative.

1.10 What are the typical steps in the environmental assessment process?

Early in this environmental process, a decision was made by the lead agencies (FHWA and WSDOT) to prepare an EA. The purpose of an EA is to determine if the Build Alternative requires an environmental impact statement.

A series of alternatives are identified and then run through a screening criteria process. This is to determine if the alternatives meet the project *purpose and need* and identify the alternative that has the least environmental effects.

Once the Build Alternative is identified, the discipline studies begin for the various areas of affect involved. Some projects have as many as 21 disciplines to analyze.

The No Build Alternative is required to be included in the studies to use as a baseline comparison. This determines what will occur if no highway improvements are made.

The EA is assembled for internal review and then issued to the agencies, public, and tribes. A Public Notice will be issued regarding the availability of the EA and the date of the environmental hearing. The environmental hearing will be held after about 15 days of the issuance of the EA.

All comments will be given careful consideration, including those from the Environmental Hearing and those received during the comment period of the EA. The lead agencies may make adjustments to the Build Alternative based on received comments, and they determine whether it will be the proper course of action for the project. If it is a proper course of action, a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) will be prepared for internal review and issued by the FHWA.

When is an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) required?

An EIS is required when it is anticipated that significant impacts will result from the completion of a proposed action. An EA is developed to identify impacts and assesses the impacts to determine if they are significant.

1.11 What decisions must be made?

As the lead NEPA agency, the FHWA will decide if the environmental documentation process is adequate, if the project impacts are not environmentally significant, and ultimately whether the project is recommended for construction. These decisions will rely on the information provided in this EA, the technical studies that were prepared in support of the EA, interaction with the public, other agencies and interested tribes, and pending the availability of funds.

1.12 How can you be involved in this decision?

You are invited to participate in this project by reviewing the EA, attending the environmental hearing and other public meetings, and providing comments on the information. The input you provide will be carefully considered in agency decision making.

Means of Public Involvement:

- Project Web site: http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/projects/SR3/SR3BelfairBypassEnvironmentalAssessment/
- Project open houses were held on January 9, 2007, April 25, 2007 and October 23, 2007. The Environmental Hearing will be held on March 12, 2013 for which the Public Notice will be given in the newspaper.
- Project meetings with individuals and groups
- Project meetings with Mason County staff
- Comments on the EA during the comment period.

The lead agencies look forward to hearing your comments on the improvements that are being proposed. Please send your comments to:

Jeff Sawyer
Environmental and Hydraulic Services Manager
WSDOT Olympic Region
P.O. Box 47417
Olympia, WA 98504-7417
Phone: 360-570-6701
Email: sawyerj@wsdot.wa.gov

1.13 How long will the Build Alternative take to build?

The project is now in the environmental review phase. Present funding will allow WSDOT to complete this EA. There is no funding for final design and construction. It is not known when the legislature will approve funding of this project. When funding becomes available, it will take three years to complete the final design, acquire right of way, and acquire environmental permits. The Bypass construction will take an estimated two years.

1.14 What will the Build Alternative cost to build?

The estimated project costs are $78.1 million based on 2009 baseline year estimates. The total cost includes environmental, preliminary engineering, right-of-way acquisition, and construction.

1.15 What approvals, permits, and consultations will be needed before construction begins?

Federal Agencies

National Marine Fisheries Service -
Endangered Species Act consultation

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers -
Section 404 Nationwide Permit

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service -
Endangered Species Act consultation

State Agencies

Department of Archaeological & Historical Preservation -
Section 106 Concurrence

Dept of Ecology -
Section 401 Water Quality Certification
Section 402 National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Permit
Coastal Zone Management Certification

Dept of Fish & Wildlife -
Hydraulic Project Approval

Local Agencies

Mason County and Kitsap County
Critical Area Ordinance Review
Noise Variance

1.16 What information is in the remainder of this document?

Chapter 2 - Description of the Alternatives
Chapter 3 - Existing Environment, Direct Effects and Mitigation
Chapter 4 - Indirect and Cumulative Effects
Chapter 5 - Agency, Tribal and Public Coordination

Appendices

A. Preliminary Commitments
B. Discipline Studies and List of Preparers
C. References
D. EA Distribution List
E. Level of Service (LOS)
F. Right of Way Acquisition Process
G. Wetland Impact Table and Maps
H. Agency and Tribal Correspondence
I. Public Involvement
J. Letter from North Mason School District

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