

# Executive Summary

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## Description of the Proposed Action

The Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT), in consultation with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), is studying alternatives to convert United States Highway 41 (US 41) from a non-Interstate freeway on the National Highway System (NHS) to an Interstate Highway between the Zoo Interchange on Interstate 94 (I-94/I-894) in Milwaukee and the US 41/I-43 interchange in Green Bay. The overall study corridor extends through Kenosha, Racine, Milwaukee, Waukesha, Washington, Dodge, Fond du Lac, Winnebago, Outagamie, and Brown counties. See project location map on previous page. As a result, WisDOT and FHWA have limited the proposed action in this environmental document to the following:

- Consider the broad costs and benefits of Interstate conversion.
- Evaluate the impacts of signing US 41 between Milwaukee and Green Bay with an Interstate route number and changing the designation of other segments of the study corridor.
- Determine the construction impacts of installing Interstate signing and other minor improvements along the study corridor.

Based on the results of the evaluation, WisDOT will determine whether to convert US 41 to an Interstate Highway.

## Purpose of and Need for the Project

The purpose of the proposed action is to enhance and accelerate economic development by converting the US 41 corridor to an Interstate Highway and signing it thus. The need for the proposed action is based in part on economics and in part on meeting the intent of the previous federal surface transportation law which identified the US 41 corridor a high priority corridor on the NHS and designated it a future Interstate route. Congress made the high priority corridor designation based on the importance of the route in serving regional, national, and international freight and vehicle movements.

Section 1, Purpose of and Need for the Proposed Action, discusses these factors in detail. The purpose of and need for the proposed improvements sets the stage for developing and evaluating the alternatives presented in Section 2.

## Alternatives

This study differs from WisDOT studies that address safety and capacity deficiencies by physically changing the footprint of a roadway. Evaluating changes to a roadway's designation without changing its footprint leads to a range of alternatives that have fewer impacts to natural resources and the built environment than capacity expansion and safety projects. The initial range of alternatives considered includes the following:

- **No-Build Alternative**—For the purposes of this document, the No-Build Alternative is referred to as the No Interstate Designation Alternative. The No Interstate Designation Alternative would maintain the US Highway status of US 41. Future improvements to US 41 with the No Interstate Designation Alternative, which are not evaluated in this document, would occur as identified in WisDOT's Six-Year Program.
- **Interstate Designation Alternative (with Overweight Grandfathering Legislation)**—This alternative, referred to as the "Interstate Designation Alternative" in the remainder of the document, would designate US 41 as I-41 from the US 41/I-94 interchange south of the Wisconsin/Illinois state line. The route would continue north concurrently with I-94 to the Mitchell Interchange, then northwesterly concurrent with I-894 to the Zoo Interchange. From the Zoo Interchange, the route would extend north along US 45 and US 41 through Fond du Lac, the Fox Valley, and Green Bay and end at the I-43 interchange. The Interstate Designation Alternative would require re-signing the length of the newly designated Interstate and other minor improvements. Installing signs along the newly designated Interstate and segments of the existing Interstate may begin in

2014. Federal legislation (referred to as “grandfathering” in this document) is being developed that would allow oversize/overweight trucks currently authorized to operate on US 41 to use I-41. The maximum gross vehicle weight allowed on Interstates is generally 80,000 pounds. Currently on US 41, trucks hauling certain commodities are authorized by Wisconsin law to haul loads of more than 80,000 pounds. The proposed grandfathering legislation would only allow overweight trucks currently authorized by existing Wisconsin statutes or permits to continue using the future Interstate.

- **Partial Interstate Designation Alternative**—This alternative would have its northern terminus at the US 41/US 151 interchange in Fond du Lac but otherwise have the same features as the Interstate Designation Alternative. The Partial Interstate Designation Alternative would reduce the length of conversion, thereby lessening the potential impact of the federal weight restrictions on Interstate roadways on trucking firms and the industries they serve.
- **Out-of-State Interstate Designation Alternative**—WisDOT investigated the potential of selecting an Interstate route number already applied to an Interstate Highway in the Chicago area. Route designations I-55 and I-57 are examples of Out-of-State Interstate Designation Alternatives that would have allowed the extension of the Interstate Highway System in Wisconsin into Illinois and beyond.
- **Interstate Designation Alternative (without Overweight Grandfathering Legislation)**—This alternative would be the same as the previously mentioned Interstate Designation Alternative except that WisDOT would pursue Interstate conversion without Congress passing overweight grandfathering legislation. With this alternative, trucks using the future Interstate would be subject to the Interstate’s 80,000 pound maximum gross vehicle weight without exception. Trucks currently hauling over 80,000 pounds on US 41 would either have to make additional trips hauling less weight or use the state trunk highway system rather than the Interstate. This alternative would have economic, community, transportation and natural resource impacts not associated with the Interstate Designation Alternative (with Overweight Grandfathering Legislation). These impacts would likely negate the economic development benefits associated with Interstate conversion that are a key to the project’s purpose and need.

## Document Type

In the summer of 2007, WisDOT and FHWA began the US 41 Interstate Conversion Study. At that time, both agencies determined a tiered environmental impact statement (EIS) was the appropriate document type because of uncertainty about the project’s potential impacts and the level of controversy. WisDOT and FHWA determined that three impact categories associated with Interstate conversion could result in significant impacts. The three impact categories evaluated included:

- Potentially significant direct human impacts caused by:
  - the Interstate’s more restrictive oversize/ overweight (OSOW) regulations
  - the Interstate’s more restrictive off-property outdoor advertising regulations
  - the change in route number and potential changes to exit numbers
- Potentially significant indirect and cumulative impacts
- Future improvement projects required to bring US 41 up to Interstate standards

The original intent was that the Tier 1 document would focus on broad issues (convert to Interstate or not), and the Tier 2 documents would focus on the direct impacts of improving US 41 features that do not meet Interstate standards, associated cost, and mitigation measures.

WisDOT has since developed a clearer understanding about the range and significance of the project’s potential impacts noted above and the reactions of the business community, the trucking industry, the outdoor advertising industry, and the public to the project. After the project team evaluated the range of the project’s potential impacts, WisDOT concluded that the project would not have significant impact and that, in general, the outreach completed has shown that the public supports the project and there is little controversy. In addition, WisDOT evaluated the 36 future projects required to bring US 41 up to Interstate standards (Section 3.3 and Appendix B).

Six of the projects were already under development based on other needs and either had an environmental report (ER) under way or a signed ER. The six projects do not have significant impacts as evidenced by the use of an ER as the environmental document. WisDOT determined the remaining 30 proposed projects will have a low likelihood of significant environmental impact, based on past project experience and review of potential impacts using the project's GIS database.

Because conversion of US 41 to an Interstate would not have significant impacts, WisDOT and FHWA agreed to change the environmental document type from a tiered EIS to an environmental report (ER). An ER is appropriate for projects that have minor environmental impacts rather than significant impacts. It should be noted that Interstate conversion is supported by the public and by participating and cooperating local, state, and federal agencies. The memorandum that describes in greater detail the reasons that the environmental document type changed is found on the CD at the back of this document. FHWA's approval of the change in environmental document type to an environmental report is found in Appendix A (page 19).

## Format

This document uses a narrative format typical of an EIS because it is better suited to evaluating the atypical impact categories associated with Interstate conversion than the question and answer format normally used in ERs. The potential impacts of converting US 41 to an Interstate, which would involve changing signs along the project corridor and other minor improvements, would be associated mainly with outdoor advertising and oversized and overweight vehicles. The question and answer format normally used in ERs is designed to succinctly describe impacts to a range of resource topics, such as wetlands, streams, protected species, and residential/commercial displacements. These resources would not be affected by Interstate conversion.

The document comprises four sections:

- Section 1, Purpose of and Need for the Proposed Action
- Section 2, Alternatives
- Section 3, Affected Environment and Impacts
- Section 4, Public Involvement and Agency Coordination

Within each section, the applicable questions from the ER's normal format will be addressed in the narrative format.

## Study Area Highway Guide

This document contains numerous references to Interstate conversion and Interstate designation. When the text refers generally to the process of changing the status of US 41 from a US Highway to an Interstate, these terms are used interchangeably. However, in certain locations, the text draws a distinction between the portion of the US 41 corridor north of the Zoo Interchange that will be "converted" to an Interstate and the portion of the corridor south of the Zoo Interchange that is already "designated" an Interstate.

This document also contains numerous references to the US 41 corridor and the Interstate conversion (or designation) corridor. Because US 41 runs concurrent with other highways within the study area and because a section of US 41 in the Milwaukee area is not part of the corridor being considered for Interstate designation, it is important to draw distinctions among the various segments of US 41 and the relationship of those segments to Interstate conversion. Exhibit ES-1 shows the interchanges mentioned in this subsection.

As used in this document:

- *US 41 corridor* refers to the route starting at the US 41/I-94 interchange roughly 1 mile south of the Wisconsin/Illinois state line and continuing north concurrently with I-94 to the Mitchell Interchange, then northwesterly concurrent with I-894 to the Zoo Interchange. From the Zoo Interchange, the route extends north along US 45 and US 41 through Fond du Lac, the Fox Valley, and Green Bay, and ends at the I-43 interchange.

- *Interstate designation corridor* refers to the route starting at the Zoo Interchange and extending north along US 45 and US 41 through Fond du Lac, the Fox Valley, and Green Bay, and ending at the I-43 interchange.

It should be noted that, as used in this document, the US 41 corridor does not include the segment of US 41 that is currently aligned with I-94/43 between the Mitchell and the Marquette Interchanges or the segment of I-94 between the Marquette and the Stadium Interchanges. Similarly, references to the US 41 corridor do not include the segment of Lisbon and Appleton Avenue (US 41) between the Stadium Interchange and the US 41/45/175 interchange. The US 41 designation along these segments would be relocated to align with the proposed I-41 route.

Exhibit ES-1 identifies the highway segments within the greater Milwaukee part of the project area and identifies whether the segments are part of the US 41 corridor, the Interstate designation corridor or neither of those corridors. Note that although US 45 is part of the US 41 corridor and the Interstate conversion corridor, this document makes no distinction between the US 41 and US 45 segments. The entire corridor is referred to as the US 41 corridor. It should also be noted that although the formal name for the Interstate System is the Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways, this document uses more commonly known terms such as the Interstate Highway System, Interstate System, or simply the Interstate.