

Public Information Meeting 2: ASKED & ANSWERED

You've asked, we're answering – Answers to questions and comments received as part of the public comment period held from October 11 to December 1, 2021.

1. What is the status of the I-526 Lowcountry Corridor EAST (I-526 LCC EAST) project?

The I-526 LCC EAST began in the spring of 2018 as a set of planning studies to conduct existing conditions reports on traffic, safety, and condition of the infrastructure. Since that time, the I-526 LCC EAST transitioned formally to a Planning & Environmental Linkages (PEL) study. An initial public information meeting was held in 2020 to help define the needs of the corridor. A second public information meeting was held in late 2021 to present the analysis completed to-date along with the reasonable alternatives and to ask for additional feedback. Input received during this process is helping to establish the purpose, needs, and priorities for future improvements within this corridor. Based on the input received, we plan to conclude the PEL Study early this year (2022).

2. Will I get to vote on which alternative I want to move forward?

The I-526 LCC EAST is a planning-level study that provides recommended projects and costs for consideration in SCDOT's future statewide transportation plans. This process does not include a public vote, however all comments received are reviewed and considered before the final report is published. The support from the community for certain improvements does assist SCDOT in developing projects that balance the transportation needs with the preferences of the community and the natural environment.

3. Why were improvements not suggested at all interchanges and only at Long Point Road?

Initially, the project purpose was focused on improving travel time reliability on the mainline only with only limited modifications at interchanges. Based on the current reasonable alternatives, the project team established that some level of improvement and reconstruction would be needed at all interchanges to accommodate the widening of the interstate mainline. Based on the studies done to date, it is anticipated that the interchange type at Clements Ferry Road would stay the same; however, ramps would have to be relocated to make room for the widened mainline. Most of the Daniel Island interchange could likely be retained; however, some work would be needed at the interstate tie-ins. The Long Point Road Interchange stands out at this phase of analysis, in that, it appears a different type of interchange may be needed at Long Point Road to address current and projected deficiencies.

4. Why are more details on noise not available?

As a planning study, we are currently defining the transportation challenges and range of possible alternatives. As the project advances into the environmental process, these concepts will be further refined. Having a refined design would allow us to model the potential noise more accurately and explore various noise reduction strategies.

5. How does SCDOT decide which communities get noise walls and which do not?

Once SCDOT has completed the detailed noise analysis during the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) phase of the project (environmental process), and potential noise impacts are identified, the following questions will be considered:

- What are the current conditions? The project team will collect data and establish a baseline for existing conditions currently experienced in the corridor. All project alternatives will be compared with the amount of noise currently experienced.
- What are the projected future conditions? Noise abatement is based upon projected traffic volumes in a future year, typically 20-30 years after construction is anticipated to begin. This is done to ensure that additional traffic volume, which could generate additional noise impacts, will be considered.
- Would a noise wall reduce the noise enough to justify its construction? Sometimes, a noise wall will not reduce the noise enough to be considered reasonable and/or feasible.
- Is a noise wall technically feasible? Every road is different. Many factors are considered such as topography, safety, drainage, utilities, maintenance of the wall, and whether driveways and side road access will be impacted.
- How many people would hear a difference in the noise? Is that number high enough to justify the cost? Sometimes, the cost is too high to build a wall when compared to the benefits received.
- Does a simple majority of property owners and tenants who receive a predicted noise level reduction due to the construction of a noise wall actually want the wall? Public preference for or against a wall is obtained through a balloting process.

6. Why are more details on right-of-way impacts not available? When will we hear more?

As a planning study, we only have design concepts with conservatively established right-of-way limits. When the project advances into the federal environmental review process, NEPA, these concepts will be further refined, and more detailed designs will be developed. More detailed designs will help to better determine, avoid, and minimize possible right-of-way impacts. This will be shared with the public and feedback would be gathered before any final decisions are made.

7. How much right-of-way is needed? Is it not possible to just widen to the median instead?

Community impacts, such as right-of-way impacts and property owner relocations, are considered as a part of the NEPA process. The conceptual alignments for potential future improvements, including proposed right-of-way, can be viewed on this mapping tool:

<https://cdmsmith.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=fe86d08aec6948a2a171fd3c6950b413>

The public and potentially impacted communities will be engaged throughout the NEPA process to gather input on the proposed project alternatives. SCDOT will work to minimize impacts to adjacent homes and businesses as the designs are developed.

We do include options that widen to the middle. However, in all cases, some amount of widening is still needed to the outside.

8. When will the right-of-way acquisition process begin? What if equivalently priced housing is not available?

The official right-of-way acquisition process does not typically start until the NEPA process is completed and a NEPA decision has been issued by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), who oversees the project. When projects are funded from the PEL Study, then schedules will be developed and provided to the community. If a build alternative were selected, SCDOT would develop the final right-of-way plans for the project. Once right-of-way plans are finalized, the plans would be provided to the SCDOT right-of-way agents and acquisition activities would begin in the steps outlined below.

SCDOT follows the Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act of 1970, as amended. On highway projects in South Carolina that require relocations, SCDOT makes a survey of the residential households to be relocated and the available housing in the area. The right-of-way agent informs you in writing of the specific comparable replacement housing, the sales prices or rent used as the basis for establishing the upper limit of the replacement housing payment, and the basis for that determination. If the comparable replacement housing available on the market is priced higher (property appraised value or rent), the homeowner may be eligible for supplemental benefits for a period of time to cover this price differential, including increased mortgage interest costs and eligible incidental expenses (such as closing costs).

For more information on the right-of-way process, visit the SCDOT website:
<https://www.scdot.org/business/pdf/rightofway/Relocation.pdf>.

9. What happens next after the PEL study?

The PEL study provides a collection of possible projects and estimated costs for consideration as part of SCDOT's future statewide transportation plans. Recommendations are also available for other project partners to consider for implementation in local efforts. If and when projects are funded, they would advance to the environmental phase, NEPA. During that process, the range of alternatives would be further refined and narrowed down to a recommended preferred alternative based on additional studies, engineering design, and public input. This is when noise and right-of-way impacts will be analyzed in detail. View the Next Steps: <https://www.526lowcountrycorridor.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Next-Steps.pdf>

10. Will we get to see the PEL study in detail once it's published?

Yes, the PEL study will include a final report and will be made available on the project website in Spring 2022.

11. Which other types of concepts were evaluated that didn't involve widening or building a new road?

The project team looked at and continues to evaluate a series of strategies that focus on operational improvements without the need for expansion, known as Transportation Systems Management and Operations (TSMO). Because of the physical constraints of the existing bridges, shoulders, and roadway, it would not be possible to retrofit the corridor with enough TSMO strategies to fully address the capacity needs of the corridor. While TSMO strategies would not provide enough lane capacity improvement or improvement to travel time reliability to work as stand-alone alternatives, they could help achieve an acceptable level of improvement in operations in combination with future widening. We will continue to evaluate these options moving forward and look for ways that they can be included as part of an expansion project. Learn More: <https://www.526lowcountrycorridor.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Transportation-Systems-Management-and-Operations-Options-2.pdf>

12. Are truck-only lanes being evaluated as part of the I-526 LCC EAST?

Adding a travel lane for trucks only was evaluated as a Transportation Systems Management and Operations (TSMO) strategy. To evaluate the potential performance of TSMO strategies at this planning-level analysis, a combination of the I-26 Corridor Management Plan and other case studies were used to report on the anticipated benefit of these strategies. The project team found that a dedicated truck lane would not meet the purpose and need of this corridor without regional implementation, and therefore, was not carried forward as a reasonable alternative. Should regional efforts make dedicated truck lanes a priority, this action would be incorporated into NEPA studies. Restricting trucks to the right-most lane remains an option.

13. How do you determine the height of the Don Holt and Wando bridges?

The height of the proposed bridges would be established in coordination with the U.S. Coast Guard during the federal environmental (NEPA) process and would include a navigational study of the channel. During the navigation study, navigational activities supported by the waterways surrounding the proposed project would be identified through vessel traffic data and waterway stakeholder surveys. The navigation study would help identify potential navigational impacts of the proposed project to determine the appropriate vertical and horizontal bridge clearances. If there are users of the waterway with a need for a higher vertical clearance, that would be taken into consideration during the navigational study. The displayed height of 65' for the Wando bridges during the 2021 public information meeting is the minimum height allowed by the U.S. Coast Guard and was used for conceptual purposes. However, the actual proposed height of the bridge would be determined by the U.S. Coast Guard during the NEPA process. Our intent in showing a lowered height for the Wando and a raised height for the Don Holt at this meeting was to get feedback from those who regularly use the waterway. Additional feedback from marinas and other commercial and recreational users would be sought in the future during a navigational study to provide a more complete picture of the actual uses of the waterways.

14. Can't SCDOT just restripe the lanes over the Don Holt and Wando bridges and mainline to widen to three lanes?

SCDOT studied options to restripe I-526, but a safety analysis predicted an increase in crashes due to the loss of existing shoulders. Why are shoulders important for your safety? Shoulders allow drivers to pull out of traffic more safely after crashes or breakdowns and provide an area for drivers to move to avoid crashes or recover control of their vehicle.

15. Are any new alternatives being proposed as a result of public comments from the 2021 public meetings?

Public and stakeholder comments on the reasonable alternatives indicated a desire to look at ways to reduce impacts to the residential areas north of I-526 between the Wando River and Long Point Road. Alternative 3 included the replacement and symmetrical expansion for both the Don Holt bridge and the Wando bridges in order to create a consistent tie into the I-526 Lowcountry Corridor WEST (LCC WEST) project which includes symmetrical widening. In addition, Alternative 3 would accommodate maintenance of traffic on the corridor during the construction process as the current facility would stay in use throughout the construction process.

This alternative was eliminated because it had the largest right-of-way footprint, resulting in the greatest number of community and natural resource impacts in addition to the impact of an African-American cemetery.

Alternative 3A was subsequently developed to reduce the size of the footprint between the Wando River and Long Point Road. This alternative would replace the Wando River bridges in stages by first constructing two new parallel two-lane bridges, then removing the existing bridges and widening the newly built bridges to four lanes. This modified alternative would retain the compatible connection with the I-526 LCC WEST project while reducing the project footprint resulting in fewer impacts to the community and natural environment as compared to Alternative 3.