




October 7, 2024

To: Regional Transportation Planning Committee
From: Darrell E. Johnson, Chief Executive Officer 
Subject: Santa Ana River Crossings and 19th Street Reclassification Review and Status Update

Overview

At the August 29, 2024, meeting of the Regional Transportation Planning Committee, staff was directed to prepare a report on the status of the pending Master Plan of Arterial Highways amendments for the Garfield-Gisler Bridge and the proposed 19th Street reclassification. This item presents the background and status for these and related segments.

Recommendation

Receive and file as an information item.

Background

The Master Plan of Arterial Highways (MPAH) was first adopted by the County of Orange (County) in 1956, and the Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA) assumed administration responsibilities in 1995. These responsibilities include the review and approval of MPAH amendments proposed by local agencies to maintain the integrity and continuity of the MPAH system. This sometimes requires OCTA to lead cooperative traffic studies and facilitate discussions between local agencies to develop consensus on the proposal before approving amendments. This is consistent with Policy 1.3 in the Guidance for Administration of the Orange County Master Plan of Arterial Highways (MPAH Guidance), as approved by the OCTA Board of Directors (Board) on August 14, 2017. Policy 1.3 requires a coordinated planning process with affected agencies, which helps to avoid or mitigate potential and/or unintended impacts to communities and facilities in neighboring jurisdictions.

The Santa Ana River Crossings have a long history dating back to the origins of the MPAH in 1956. At that time, the Garfield-Gisler bridge was identified on the MPAH as one of four crossings over the Santa Ana River that were planned to facilitate east-west traffic flow between Interstate 405 and Pacific Coast Highway.

Two of the four bridge crossings (Hamilton-Victoria and Adams Street) have been constructed. The other two (19th Street-Banning and Garfield-Gisler) bridges remained unbuilt and faced community opposition due to concerns with the potential for increased traffic in local neighborhoods. However, some parties have historically favored the proposed bridges to distribute traffic more evenly. For example, the City of Newport Beach (Newport Beach) has expressed concerns with additional traffic routing to Pacific Coast Highway if the bridges, or adequate substitutes, are not provided. The locations of the unbuilt Santa Ana River Crossings and the requested 19th Street reclassification are depicted in Attachment A. A summary of these long-standing issues and an overview of the more recent request to reclassify 19th Street in the City of Costa Mesa (Costa Mesa) are provided below.

Discussion

Santa Ana River Crossings

In 1991, Costa Mesa requested that the County (the MPAH administrator at that time) remove the Garfield-Gisler bridge and 19th Street-Banning bridge from the MPAH. In 1993, the County and the cities of Costa Mesa, Huntington Beach, Fountain Valley, and Newport Beach (affected agencies) conducted the first traffic study of the proposed bridge deletions, called the Phase I Santa Ana River Crossing (SARX) Study. The study concluded that deletion of the bridges would require substantial improvements to the surrounding arterial highway system to mitigate the traffic that would be diverted. Consequently, the request to delete the bridges from the MPAH was not approved.

At the urging of neighborhood groups and Costa Mesa, the County led another effort to build consensus on alternatives to the planned bridges. An extensive public outreach effort and a Technical Advisory Group (TAG) consisting of the local agencies and citizens identified seven alternatives for further study. The County was on the verge of conducting a comprehensive environmental impact report (EIR) when the Orange County bankruptcy of 1994 occurred. As a result, the MPAH was transferred to OCTA in 1995.

By 1998, OCTA initiated development of the Santa Ana River Crossings Study and a program level EIR (PEIR) in cooperation with the affected agencies. This effort engaged staff from the affected agencies through a TAG, as well as elected officials from the affected agencies through a Policy Advisory Committee (PAC). The initial range of alternatives was narrowed to one alternative that called for modifications to both the 19th Street-Banning Avenue and Garfield/Gisler Bridges. The Draft PEIR was prepared in 2001, and a final version was presented to the Board in 2002. However, it was not certified by the Board and remained as a Draft PEIR due to unresolved differences of opinion amongst the jurisdictions.

In 2003, an item was brought to the Board to approve the Combined Transportation Funding Program projects, which included a project submitted by the City of Fountain Valley to develop preliminary designs and a project-level EIR for the Garfield-Gisler Bridge. A decision on funding this project was deferred multiple times to allow more time for the affected agencies to build consensus. In 2004, staff from OCTA and the cities of Fountain Valley and Costa Mesa agreed to recommending approval of the funding for the project with the condition that the study would be led by OCTA, in cooperation with the cities, and include analysis of an alternative to building the bridge. In August 2004, the Board approved the funding consistent with the agreed upon conditions.

In 2005, OCTA initiated the cooperative study, originally known as the Garfield-Gisler Preliminary Engineering and Supplemental Environmental Impact Report (PE/SEIR). The intent was to provide information that would enable the cities of Costa Mesa, Fountain Valley, and Huntington Beach to reach consensus as to whether the bridge should be deleted from the MPAH. As the study progressed, it was determined that the 2001 Draft PEIR could not be used as the basis for an SEIR. Therefore, the SEIR portion was dropped, and the study was renamed the Garfield-Gisler Area Study. OCTA staff held a series of meetings with the TAG and PAC to discuss options for reaching consensus. Through these meetings, it was agreed that:

1. OCTA would complete the Garfield-Gisler Area Study, in cooperation with the cities of Costa Mesa, Fountain Valley, Huntington Beach, Newport Beach, and the County of Orange.
2. The Garfield-Gisler Area Study would provide conceptual technical data and preliminary cost estimates for the following three alternatives:
 - A. Build the Garfield-Gisler Bridge and implement associated roadway improvements
 - B. Do not build the Garfield-Gisler Bridge, but implement roadway improvements generally consistent with those identified for the Garfield-Gisler area in the 2001 Draft PEIR
 - C. Do not build the Garfield-Gisler Bridge, but implement alternative mitigation strategies such as Smart Street improvements on major arterials in the study area to achieve traffic flow enhancements generally equivalent to those that would be realized by constructing the bridge
3. Upon completion of the Garfield-Gisler Area Study, OCTA and the cities of Costa Mesa, Fountain Valley, and Huntington Beach would explore options to formalize the study's findings.

In 2006, the results of the study were shared with the PAC. The PAC unanimously voted to advance the Smart Street and Bridge Widening Alternative A improvements (consistent with alternative 2.C in the list above), and to amend the MPAH to reclassify the Garfield-Gisler Bridge as “Right-of-Way Reserve”. This classification preserves the right-of-way on the MPAH but requires agencies to refrain from including the facility for general plan purposes or traffic analysis. This direction led to the 2006 memorandum of understanding (MOU) that is in place today (Attachment B), which includes the Smart Street and Bridge Widening Alternative A improvements. With the MOU in place, the party agencies have been working to implement the identified improvements consistent with the MOU terms.

In 2019, staff from the MOU party agencies met several times to discuss the status of the agreement. All agencies agreed that the MOU should be amended to allow the 405 Improvement Project to be completed and for traffic patterns to settle before making a final determination of the bridge’s disposition on the MPAH (Attachment C). Earlier this year, the party agencies reported that 23 of the 25 improvement projects have been completed, partially completed, or have not been needed to maintain an acceptable level of service. One of the remaining projects is a modification of signal timing at the intersection of Ward Street and Talbert Avenue. The need for this will be evaluated now that the 405 Improvement Project is complete. The other remaining project calls for a bus turnout on the northbound side of Brookhurst Street at Adams Avenue, but right-of-way limitations have prevented implementation.

As for the 19th Street-Banning Avenue Bridge, discussions were reinitiated in 2011, at the request of the local jurisdictions. The cities of Costa Mesa and Huntington Beach remained strongly opposed to constructing the 19th Street-Banning Avenue Bridge, with Newport Beach in support of the proposed bridge. As a result of these discussions and further study, an item was presented and approved by the Board in March 2012, to remove the 19th Street-Banning Avenue Bridge from the MPAH, as the Board has discretion to diverge from processes in the MPAH Guidance, per Policy 2.13. However, this action was rescinded by the Board in May 2012, following appeals from Newport Beach and advocates in support of the 19th Street-Banning Avenue Bridge. Consequently, staff were directed to work with the affected agencies to produce an agreement that ultimately eliminates the 19th Street-Banning Avenue Bridge from the MPAH. This process was successful in building consensus among the affected agencies. The results of the analysis were presented to the Board in November 2012, and the Board made a final decision to remove the 19th Street-Banning Avenue Bridge from the MPAH and to conduct a follow-up study to analyze potential impacts and potential improvements along Pacific Coast Highway in Newport Beach, which has since been completed.

Next Steps for Garfield-Gisler Bridge

Now that the 405 Improvement Project has been completed and opened to traffic, staff intends to lead a traffic study in coordination with the cities of Costa Mesa, Fountain Valley, and Huntington Beach. The study will assess and determine whether to recommend the removal of the Garfield-Gisler Bridge from the MPAH. The MOU outlines that one of OCTA's responsibilities is to conduct a cooperative study and determine the findings by 2026. Additionally, the study is included in the approved OCTA Fiscal Year (FY) 2024-25 Budget.

19th Street Reclassification Request

In February 2019, Costa Mesa submitted an MPAH amendment request to reclassify West 19th Street between the city's western limit (east of the location of the former 19th Street – Banning Avenue Bridge) to Placentia Avenue, from a primary (four-lane, divided) arterial to a divided collector (two-lane, divided). At that time, this segment of 19th Street was built as a divided collector. OCTA staff requested additional traffic analysis because the forecasted average daily traffic for West 19th Street segment exceeded the level of service (LOS) threshold of LOS C for a divided collector. The forecasted average daily traffic increase on 19th Street was attributed in part to the proposed development at Banning Ranch and 19th Street's planned connection to Bluff Road, an unbuilt major (six-lane, divided) arterial that connects to Banning Ranch.

In November 2019, OCTA facilitated a meeting with Costa Mesa and the County of Orange to discuss the amendment request. Newport Beach was invited to this meeting but did not attend. Subsequently, Newport Beach staff requested that any changes to MPAH facilities be postponed while they update the Housing and Circulation Elements of their General Plan. Though the Banning Ranch project was previously denied by the California Coastal Commission, Newport Beach staff believed that there was still an opportunity for development and that it may be necessary to help meet their state-mandated Regional Housing Needs Assessment (RHNA) allocation. Newport Beach stated they will conduct further analysis of the need for a full buildout on Bluff Road from Coast Highway to 19th Street during their General Plan Update.

In December 2019, OCTA staff reached out to Costa Mesa staff, via email, to discuss options for moving forward with the 19th Street amendment request; however, Costa Mesa staff did not respond. Later, in 2020, Costa Mesa implemented temporary bicycle lane treatments as a demonstration project. Then, in 2022, the bicycle lanes on 19th Street were made permanent. Today, 19th Street is configured as a collector (two-lane, undivided) arterial with class II bicycle lanes (portions of which are buffered).

Concurrently, in mid-2021, OCTA reengaged with the two cities and the County of Orange in a series of meetings on Costa Mesa's reclassification request. Newport Beach expressed concerns about the reclassification, citing the potential need for the planned future connection of 19th Street to the planned and unbuilt Bluff Road. This issue was complicated by the pending sale of Banning Ranch, which made it a permanent preserve and, once again, by planned land-use changes in both cities due to state-mandated RHNA requirements. In early 2022, OCTA suggested reconvening the agencies to further discuss a traffic study on the broader MPAH network in the Banning Ranch vicinity that would evaluate several potential amendments including, but not limited to, 19th Street and Bluff Road. It was agreed that the agencies would reconvene and begin this study after land-use plans were updated for both cities and the future of Banning Ranch was determined. In late 2022, the sale of Banning Ranch was finalized, and the property was renamed the Frank and Joan Randall Preserve, but the land-use plans have not been updated yet by Newport Beach to reflect the sale and intended open space preserve status.

At the February 12, 2024, OCTA Board meeting, direction was given to reengage the cities of Costa Mesa and Newport Beach. Staff has been coordinating with the cities over the past several months. On May 30, 2024, OCTA facilitated a meeting with both cities to determine the best approach to achieve consensus on the 19th Street amendment request and any other necessary MPAH amendments in the vicinity. Both cities again agreed that OCTA should lead a traffic study and requested OCTA to hold initiating the study until after they have each completed state-mandated updates to their respective General Plan (GP) Housing Elements. This is to comply with RHNA requirements that must be met by February 2025. These GP updates would allow the future OCTA-led study to incorporate each city's latest housing plans.

Next Steps for the 19th Street Reclassification

Staff intends to lead a traffic study (to be concluded by the end of 2025) in coordination with the cities of Costa Mesa and Newport Beach to identify and advance MPAH network amendments in the vicinity of the Frank and Joan Randall Preserve. This would include Costa Mesa's 19th Street reclassification request. This study is part of the approved OCTA budget for FY 2025, and it would be initiated after the cities provide their updated Housing Element data to use in the study. The anticipated traffic study will be used to build consensus on amendments to the MPAH for consideration by the Board. If the recommended amendments are approved by the Board, the MPAH will be updated accordingly once both cities have revised their Circulation Elements to reflect the Board-approved MPAH amendments.

Summary

OCTA has been engaged in collaborative efforts with local jurisdictions over many years regarding the proposed MPAH amendments for the Santa Ana River Crossings and the 19th Street reclassification. To date, OCTA has successfully worked with local partners to remove the 19th Street-Banning Avenue Bridge from the MPAH, execute an MOU to cooperatively work towards the removal of the Garfield-Gisler Bridge, and conduct a cooperative traffic study to advance the 19th Street reclassification request and identify other MPAH amendments that may be necessary in the vicinity of the former Banning Ranch development. It is important to note that there have been significant disagreements regarding the proposed amendments, and these processes have been successful in moving the local jurisdictions toward consensus, as required by the Board-approved MPAH policies. Although these processes have taken significant time, the next steps are anticipated to conclude these issues.

Attachments

- A. Master Plan of Arterial Highways in Costa Mesa and Newport Beach Area
- B. Memorandum of Understanding C-6-0834 Among Cities of Costa Mesa, Fountain Valley and Huntington Beach and the Orange County Transportation Authority regarding Agency Responsibilities for Implementing the Consensus Recommendation for the Garfield-Gisler Bridge Crossing over the Santa Ana River
- C. Amendment No. 1 to Memorandum of Understanding C-6-0834 Among Cities of Costa Mesa, Fountain Valley and Huntington Beach and the Orange County Transportation Authority regarding Agency Responsibilities for Implementing the Consensus Recommendation for the Garfield-Gisler Bridge Crossing over the Santa Ana River

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