

What is the I-526 Lowcountry Corridor WEST Project?

The South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT), in cooperation with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), is preparing this Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the proposed I-526 Lowcountry Corridor WEST Project (I-526 LCC WEST) to address the existing and future transportation demands on the I-526 corridor from Paul Cantrell Boulevard to Virginia Avenue in North Charleston, South Carolina. The purpose of the project is to increase capacity at the I-26/I-526 interchange and along the I-526 mainline, thereby relieving traffic congestion and improving operations at the I-26/I-526 interchange and along the I-526 mainline from Paul Cantrell Boulevard to Virginia Avenue, Figure 1.

The I-526 and I-26 system interchange is a key interchange locally. It links downtown Charleston, Summerville, West Ashley, and Mount Pleasant. I-26 links the Charleston area with other major cities to the west like Columbia, Spartanburg, and Asheville, North Carolina, as well as with I-95, I-77, I-20, and I-85.

I-526 provides the only freeway access to two important port terminals, the North Charleston terminal, and the Wando Welch terminal. Wando Welch is the busiest terminal in the region and has no access to rail. I-526 is an important route for daily commuting traffic and is part of the network for transporting freight and commercial goods to and from the Port of Charleston and throughout the region. I-526 also provides freeway crossings over three major rivers. To the east of I-26, the route crosses the Cooper and Wando Rivers providing an important connection, not to mention hurricane evacuation route, for the growing Daniel Island and Mount Pleasant areas. To the west of I-26, the route crosses the Ashley River and provides a similar connection to the growing West Ashley area.



Figure 1 I-526 LCC WEST Project Study Area

The following planned improvements were identified in the vicinity of the proposed project using the Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester Council of Governments list of existing plus committed projects.

- I-26 Widening from Port Access Road Interchange to I-526 Interchange
- I-526 at International Boulevard Interchange Modification
- Palmetto Commerce Parkway (Phase III) from Ashley Phosphate Road to International Boulevard
- Airport Connector Road - West Montague Avenue to Michaux Parkway to Airport Terminal
- Glenn McConnell Parkway Widening from Bees Ferry Road to Rutherford Way
- Mark Clark Expressway Extension
- U.S. 17/Main Road Intersection
- Main Road (Phase I) from Bees Ferry Road to River Road
- Dorchester Road Widening from Michaux Parkway to Patriot Boulevard
- Stromboli Avenue Extension from Spruill Avenue to Port Access Road
- I-26 Port Access Road Interchange
- Railroad Avenue Extension from Mabeline Road to Eagle Landing Drive
- Northside Drive to tie in to Spa Road
- Clements Ferry Road Widening from I-526 Interchange to Jack Primus Road
- I-26 Palmetto Commerce Parkway (Weber Drive) Interchange
- SC Ports New Terminal Development at Hugh Leatherman Terminal and Wando Welch Terminal
- Charleston International Airport Expansion

What is the Draft Environmental Impact Statement?

This Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) is the culmination of technical studies and reports, interagency coordination, and community outreach and feedback. It is a document for you – the public, stakeholders, and decision makers. The DEIS documents the purpose and need for the project; presents a discussion of the alternatives and the analysis of them; describes the affected environment, assessment of environmental, transportation, social, and economic impacts; identifies appropriate mitigation measures to offset impacts; and presents a recommended preferred alternative. It also incorporates analysis and feedback from public and agency sources gathered during the various phases of the DEIS development.

The DEIS was developed in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and corresponding regulations and guidelines of the FHWA, the lead federal agency (23 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] 771 and 40 CFR 1500–1508). Technical studies, interagency coordination, community outreach, and feedback from the public and agencies were all incorporated into the DEIS.

What is the Purpose of the Project and Why is it Needed?

The purpose of the project is to increase capacity at the I-26/I-526 interchange and along the I-526 mainline, thereby relieving traffic congestion and improving operations at the I-26/I-526 interchange and along the I-526 mainline from Paul Cantrell Boulevard to Virginia Avenue.

SCDOT currently ranks the segment of I-526 between I-26 and Virginia Avenue as the most congested segment of interstate highway in the state. The remainder of the I-526 LCC WEST project, from I-26 to Paul Cantrell Boulevard, ranks among the top ten of the state's most congested corridors. Forecasts show that without improvements,

segments of the corridor will continue to be among the state's most congested in 2040. Due to geometric deficiencies, the interchange of I-526 and I-26 is the major source of the congestion (refer to Section 2.1.5 for additional information).

The I-526/I-26 interchange is listed as the #2 project in the 2035 Charleston Area Transportation Study (CHATS) Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) Ranked List of Candidate Transportation Projects, is the #6 project on SCDOT's Act 114 Interstate Capacity List, and is listed in SCDOT's Statewide Transportation Improvement Program 2017-2022. Congestion was detailed in SCDOT's Corridor Analysis for I-526 Between North Charleston and West Ashley and in the Interstate Plan portion of SCDOT's 2014 Multimodal Transportation Plan, which lists four segments within this project corridor among the top 20 most congested interstate segments.

Act 114 of 2007
changed the SC Code of Laws
to require SCDOT to rank and
prioritize transportation projects
based on specific criteria.

The need of this project is derived from the following factors, which are detailed further in Chapter 2:

- Growth in population and employment
- Decreased mobility and increased traffic congestion
- Existing traffic conditions
- Projected traffic conditions
- Geometric Deficiencies

What are the Alternatives for the Project and How were they Evaluated?

A six-step process was developed to identify alternatives and to determine which alternatives minimize potential impacts to the human and natural environment, while satisfying the purpose and need, Figure 2. Detailed information regarding the alternatives development and evaluation can be found in Chapter 3.

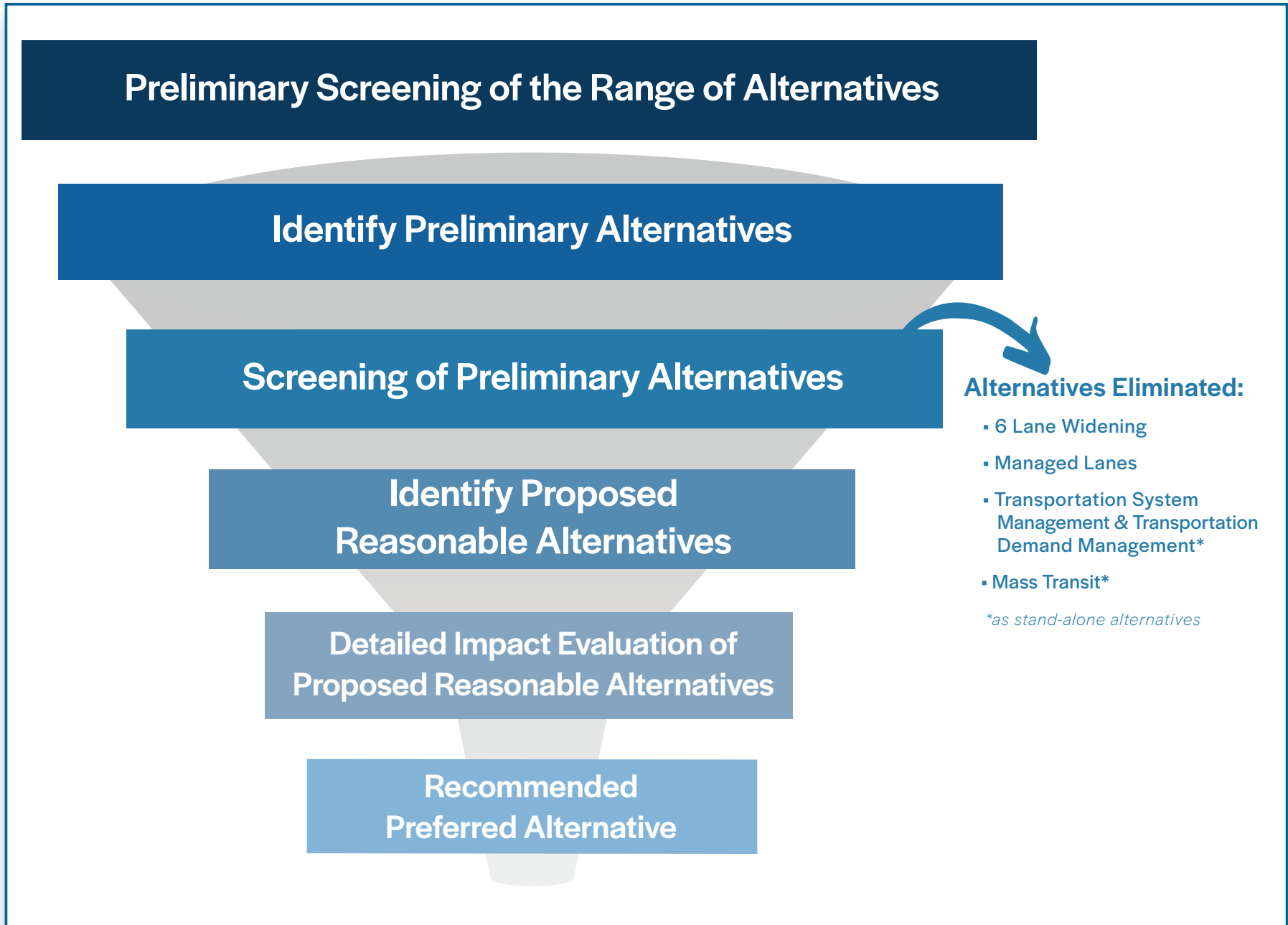


Figure 2 Alternatives Development Flowchart

Step 1: Preliminary Screening of the Range of Alternatives

Ten alternatives were initially developed based on a combination of the findings of the 2013 Corridor Study, CHATS Congestion Management Process (CMP), SCDOT goals and priorities, further evaluation of the corridor, and input from the public and agencies. The ten initial alternatives were general in nature and were evaluated based on the ability to satisfy the purpose and need of the I-526 LCC WEST project, Table 1. The preliminary range of alternatives were developed to include the following:

- No-Build
- Improvements to existing local facilities
 - > East Montague Avenue
 - > Remount Road
- New location alternatives
 - > US 78 to Virginia Avenue
 - > Ashley Phosphate Road to Virginia Avenue
 - > Bees Ferry Road to Dorchester Road
- Managed Lanes
- Transportation System Management (TSM) and Transportation Demand Management (TDM) Strategies
- Mass Transit
- Existing Corridor Improvements

No-Build - the existing facility and any funded improvements; it serves as a baseline for the comparison of future conditions and impacts and, therefore, may not be screened out of the range of alternatives at this step

Managed Lanes - highway facilities or a set of lanes where operational strategies are proactively implemented and managed in response to changing conditions

TSM/TDM - improvements to efficiency or safety, or strategies to reduce the number of vehicle trips during high congestion periods

Capacity - the maximum amount of traffic a road can accommodate at a given speed without delay

Table 1 Preliminary Screening of the Range of Alternatives

	No Build	Improvements to Existing Local Facilities		New Location			Managed Lanes*	TSM/TDM*	Mass Transit*	Existing Corridor Improvements
		East Montague Ave	Remount Rd	US 78 to Virginia Ave	Ashley Phosphate Rd to Virginia Ave	Bees Ferry Rd to Dorchester Rd				
Satisfies I-526 LCC WEST Purpose & Need	-									
Carried Forward as Preliminary Alternatives										

* Eliminated as stand-alone alternatives

Step 2: Identify Preliminary Alternatives

The two alternatives that advanced from the preliminary screening in Step 1 are considered Preliminary Alternatives and moved on to the next level of screening in Step 2. The existing corridor improvements alternative was expanded to include options for improving both the mainline interstate and associated interchanges, resulting in the following 25 alternatives being identified as Preliminary Alternatives:

- No-Build
- Existing Corridor Improvements
 - > Mainline Interstate Alternatives
 - 6-lane widening
 - 8-lane widening
 - > Interchange Alternatives
 - I-526 at Paul Cantrell Boulevard - Five alternatives were evaluated at this interchange:
 1. Triple Lefts to I-526 eastbound with Improved Loops
 2. Semi-Directional Ramp to I-526 eastbound with Improved Loops
 3. Diverging Diamond Interchange
 4. Single Point Interchange with Semi-Directional Ramp to I-526 eastbound
 5. Semi-Directional Ramp to I-526 eastbound
 - Paul Cantrell Boulevard at Magwood Drive - Seven alternatives were evaluated at this intersection:
 1. Diamond
 2. Diamond with Braided Ramps
 3. Single Point Interchange
 4. Compressed Diamond with Phase Overlap
 5. Interchange with Separated Overpass Bridge
 6. Maximized At-Grade Intersection
 7. Continuous Flow Intersection
 - I-26/I-526 System - Four alternatives were evaluated at this interchange:
 1. Semi-Directional Interchange
 2. Semi-Directional Interchange with One Loop Ramp Retained
 3. Semi-Directional Turbine Interchange
 4. Semi-Directional Interchange with Three Levels of Ramping
 - I-526 at Rivers Avenue - Two alternatives were evaluated at this interchange:
 1. Relocated Partial Cloverleaf
 2. Basic Build
 - I-526 at N Rhett Avenue and Virginia Avenue (Due to proximity, these interchanges are combined.)
Four alternatives were evaluated at this interchange:
 1. On-ramp from N Rhett Avenue to I-526 eastbound and westbound through one intersection along N Rhett Avenue with separate access to Virginia Avenue
 2. Diamond Interchange with access to Virginia Avenue
 3. Improve existing Loop Ramps
 4. Directional ramps from northbound to southbound N Rhett Avenue traffic

The eight alternatives that were eliminated in this step would not substantially reduce congestion and/or improve traffic operations, or would have unacceptable environmental impacts.

Step 3: Screening of Preliminary Alternatives

The 25 Preliminary Alternatives were then evaluated by screening criteria at a qualitative level. If a Preliminary Alternative was unable to meet the criteria, then it was considered not practicable or feasible. The ten alternatives that met the screening criteria are identified as Proposed Reasonable Alternatives, Table 2. The Preliminary Alternatives were evaluated by the following screening criteria:

- Acceptable Level of Service (LOS)
- Compatible with Adjacent Interchange
- Geometric Deficiencies Resolved
- Flexibility with Don Holt Bridge Replacement
- Constructability

Table 2 Screening of the Preliminary Alternatives

	No Build	Mainline		I-526 at Paul Cantrell Blvd					Paul Cantrell Blvd at Magwood Dr							I-26/I-526 System				I-526 at Rivers Ave		I-526 at N Rhett/Virginia Ave			
		6-lane	8-lane	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	2	3	4	1	2	1	2	3	4
Acceptable LOS	✗	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Compatible with Adjacent Interchange	-	-	-	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗
Geometric Deficiencies Resolved	✗	-	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓
Flexibility with Don Holt Bridge Replacement	✓	✓	✓	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	✓	✓	✓	✓
Constructability	-	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓
Carried Forward as Reasonable Alternatives	✓	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗

Step 4: Identify Proposed Reasonable Alternatives

The Preliminary Alternatives that met the screening criteria and purpose and need of the project were carried forward as the Proposed Reasonable Alternatives. Two alternatives at the I-26/I-526 system interchange and two alternatives at the Rivers Avenue interchange met the screening criteria and the purpose and need of the project. However, due to the proximity of I-526 at I-26 and Rivers Avenue, these interchanges were combined, resulting in four alternatives being carried forward as Proposed Reasonable Alternatives. The following Proposed Reasonable Alternatives were presented at the November 2019 I-526 LCC WEST Public Information Meeting (PIM) for public and agency review and comment:

- No-Build
- Mainline Interstate 8-lane widening
- Interchange Alternatives
 - > One alternative at I-526 at Paul Cantrell Boulevard that includes the intersection at Magwood Drive
 - > Four alternatives at I-526 at I-26 and Rivers Avenue
 - Alternative 1
 - Alternative 1A
 - Alternative 2
 - Alternative 2A
 - > Five alternatives at I-526 at N Rhett/Virginia Avenue
 - Alternative 1
 - Alternative 2

Following the PIM, three additional interchange alternatives (*) were developed at N Rhett/Virginia Avenue based on public and agency input, resulting in the following Proposed Reasonable Alternatives:

- No-Build
- Mainline Interstate 8-lane widening
- Interchange Alternatives
 - > One alternative at I-526 at Paul Cantrell Boulevard that includes the intersection at Magwood Drive
 - > Four alternatives at I-526 at I-26 and Rivers Avenue
 - Alternative 1
 - Alternative 1A
 - Alternative 2
 - Alternative 2A
 - > Five alternatives at I-526 at N Rhett/Virginia Avenue
 - Alternative 1
 - Alternative 2
 - Alternative 2A*
 - Alternative 5*
 - Alternative 6*

Step 5: Detailed Impact Evaluation of Proposed Reasonable Alternatives

The Proposed Reasonable Alternatives that came out of Step 4 were evaluated based on more detailed evaluation criteria:

- Purpose & Need
 - > Traffic
 - AADT
 - v/c Ratio
 - LOS
- Essential Fish Habitat
- Hazardous Materials
- Cultural Resources
- Noise
- Delineated Wetlands
- Relocations
- Environmental Justice
- Threatened & Endangered Species
- Utilities
- Cost
- Section 4(f) & 6(f)
- Reduce/Eliminate Geometric Deficiencies to Improve Safety
- Hurricane Evacuation Route Compatibility

AADT = Average Annual Daily Traffic

v/c Ratio = volume to capacity Ratio - Compares roadway demand (volume) with roadway supply (capacity)

LOS = Level of Service - Way to describe roadway operating conditions based on speed, travel time, maneuverability, delay and safety

Environmental Justice (EJ) = the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, income, national origin, or educational level with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies.

Section 4(f) = the original section within the U.S. Department of Transportation Act of 1966 which provided for consideration of park and recreation lands, wildlife and waterfowl refuges, and historic sites during transportation project development.

Section 6(f) = refers to federal law ensuring that any recreational lands that have received Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) money cannot be converted to non-recreational purposes without approval by the US Department of the Interior National Park Service. Section 6(f) also requires that any applicable land converted to non-recreational uses must be replaced with land of equal or greater value, location, and usefulness.

In order to perform a detailed impact evaluation on the Proposed Reasonable Alternatives identified in Step 4, the widening of the mainline to 8-lanes was combined with the interchange alternatives into the following three sections as shown in Figure 3.

- Paul Cantrell Boulevard to International Boulevard
- International Boulevard to Rivers Avenue
- Rivers Avenue to Virginia Avenue

Step 6: Recommended Preferred Alternative

In developing the Recommended Preferred Alternative, further detailed evaluations of the Proposed Reasonable Alternatives from Step 5 were conducted to determine if any of the alternatives were not reasonable and, therefore, could be eliminated from further consideration. An alternative was determined not reasonable if:

1. The alternative does not satisfy the purpose of and need for the project.
2. The alternative is determined to be not practical or feasible from a technical and/or economic standpoint.
3. The alternative substantially duplicates another alternative.

After applying these additional evaluation criteria, the Proposed Reasonable Alternative that best balanced the potential impacts to the human and natural environment was identified as the Recommended Preferred Alternative:

- The interchange at Paul Cantrell Boulevard and I-526, the intersection at Paul Cantrell Boulevard and Magwood Drive, and the widening to 8-lanes of I-526 from Paul Cantrell Boulevard to International Boulevard.
- Alternative 2 at I-526 at I-26 and Rivers Avenue and the widening to 8-lanes from International Boulevard to Rivers Avenue.
- Alternative 2A at I-526 at N Rhett/Virginia Avenue and the widening to 8-lanes from Rivers Avenue to Virginia Avenue.

The Recommended Preferred Alternative proposes to widen I-526 from Paul Cantrell Boulevard to I-26 to an eight-lane facility (four lanes in each direction). Additionally, the project would reconfigure the interchange of I-26 and I-526 to add directional ramps to increase capacity, add a collector-distributor facility (a way of connecting closely spaced interchanges) to I-526, and expand the existing collector-distributor on I-26 to further improve operations. Improvements would also be made to the interchanges of I-26 and Aviation Avenue and Montague Avenue. The project would make other operational improvements at the interchanges along I-526. Specifically, the interchanges at Paul Cantrell Boulevard (including the adjacent intersection with Magwood Drive), International Boulevard, and N Rhett Avenue/Virginia Avenue would undergo various types of reconfiguration. A detailed description of the proposed changes, along with the traffic engineering analysis of the changes, can be found in Appendix B, beginning on page 5-14.

This combination of Proposed Reasonable Alternatives was selected as the Recommended Preferred Alternative because of the lower number of relocations, lower potential impact to environmental justice populations, lower impact to wetlands and streams, improved traffic operations, and the ability to resolve a large number of existing geometric deficiencies, refer to Table 3 and Table 4. The final selection of an alternative will not be made until the Recommended Preferred Alternative impacts and comments on the DEIS from the public hearing have been fully evaluated.

Pedestrian and Cyclist Accommodations

To address pedestrian and cyclist mobility needs within the I-526 LCC WEST project corridor, the addition of potential bicycle and pedestrian improvements documented in local and regional transportation plans within the I-526 corridor was evaluated in the development of this DEIS. It was determined that incorporating plans for a shared use path (SUP) parallel to I-526 across the Ashley River into the I-526 LCC WEST project offers the benefit of consolidating the construction costs and impacts of a river crossing into a single undertaking. Various options were evaluated for how to add a 14-foot wide SUP for pedestrian and bicycle traffic to the corridor crossing the river. The SUP incorporated into the Recommended Preferred Alternative would:

- Widen I-526 across the Ashley River to the west (upstream) side of both the eastbound and westbound bridges
- Route the SUP on the west (upstream) side of the westbound bridge.

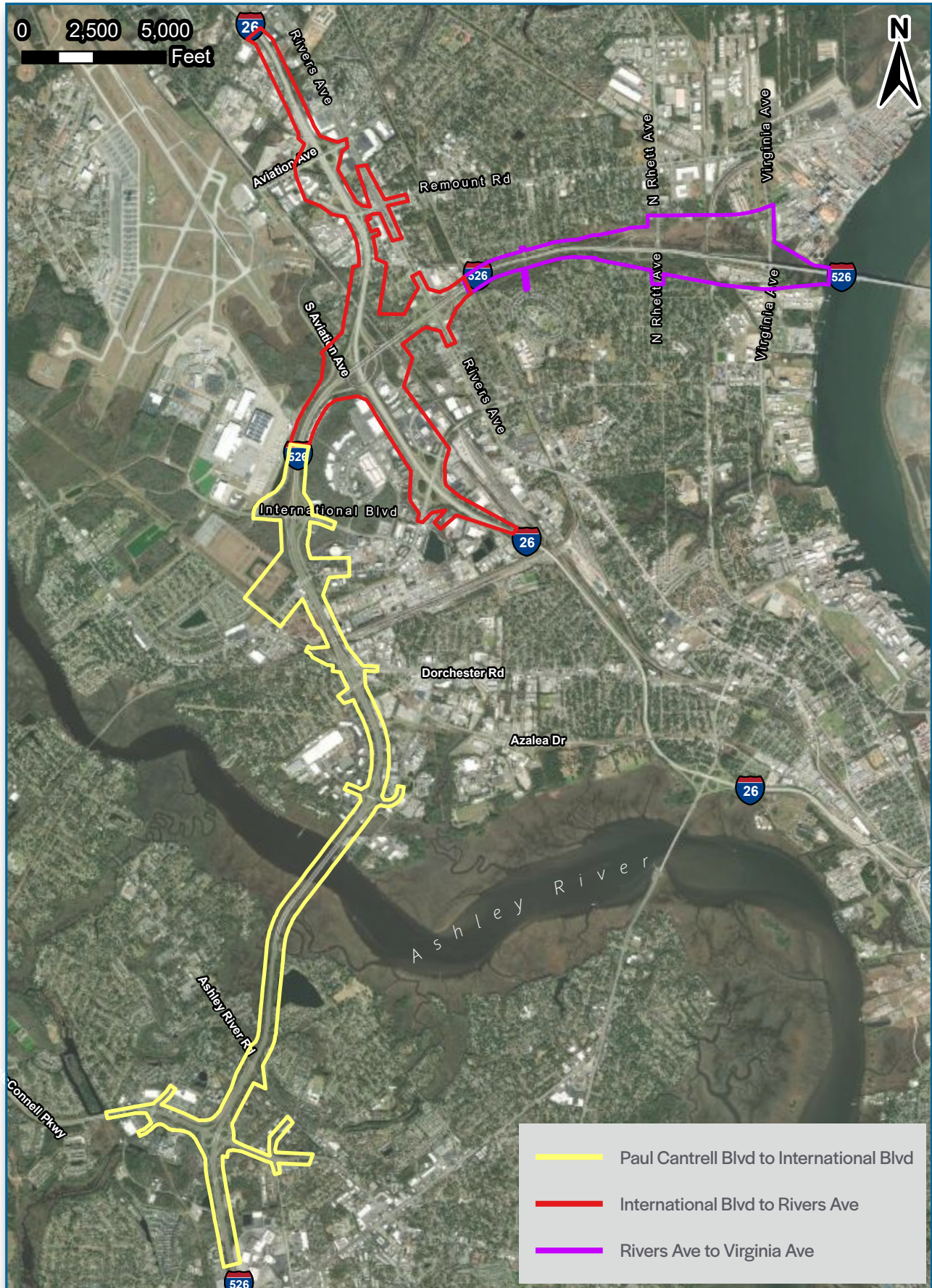


Figure 3 Recommended Preferred Alternative

Table 3 Proposed Reasonable Alternatives Screening Matrix : Recommended Preferred Alternative Sections

		No-Build	Paul Cantrell Blvd to International Blvd	International Blvd to Rivers Ave: Alternative 2	Rivers Ave to Virginia Ave: Alternative 2A		
Purpose & Need: 2050 Traffic Analysis	Geometric Deficiencies Resolved	0/30	15/16	8/11	3/3		
	Provides Direct Access to/from I-526 (Yes/No)	Yes	Yes	Yes	526 EB to Virginia No 526 WB to Virginia Yes Virginia to 526 EB Yes Virginia to 526 WB Yes		
	Provides Direct Access to/from I-26 (Yes/No)	N/A	N/A	No	N/A		
	Weighted v/c Ratio	> 1.00	0.72 0.75 0.72 0.67	0.71	0.91		
	Intersection Delay/LOS	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	AM Peak Hour	PM Peak Hour
						EB C/30.1	WB B/18.6
Mainline LOS	F	D/D/C/C	C	C/D			
Freshwater Wetland Impact Based on R/W	(Acres)	0	19.3	28.5	49.9		
Critical Area Impact Based on R/W	(Acres)	0	19.6	0	2.4		
Critical Area (Ashley River) Bridge Construction Temporary Access Based on R/W	(Acres)	0	9.1	N/A	N/A		
Pond Impact Based on R/W	(Acres)	0	0.03	0	0		
Freshwater Stream Impact Based on R/W	(Feet)	0	327.0	13,327.1	4,977.6		
Floodplains	(Acres)	0	385	419	153		
Relocations	Residential	0	1 single-family homes; 1 Multi-Family Complexes, 3 Units Total	34 Single-Family Homes; 11 Mobile Homes; 16 Multi-Family Complexes, 44 Units Total	1 Single-Family Home		
	Businesses	0	6	9	1		
	Churches	0	0	1 - Enoch Chapel Methodist	0		
	Community Facilities	0	0	2 - Highland Terrace-Liberty Park Community Center, Russelldale Community Center	0		
	Total	0	10	101	2		
Environmental Justice	Yes/No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes		
Threatened & Endangered Species		0	May Affect, Not Likely to Adversely Affect	May Affect, Not Likey to Adversely Affect	May Affect, Not Likey to Adversely Affect		
Essential Fish Habitat	Yes/No	No	Yes	No	Yes		
Cultural Resources	Eligibility for Listing on NRHP	No Effect	No Effect: Potentially Eligible Underwater Resource 006-1	No Adverse Effect	No Effect: No Potentially Eligible Resources		
Section 4(f) & 6(f)	Yes/No	No	No	Yes Highland Terrace-Liberty Park Community Center - 4(f) & 6(f); Russelldale Community Center - 4(f)	No		
Utilities	\$	\$0	\$12,901,540	\$37,082,500 (includes Alternative 1 or 2 at N Rhett/Virginia Ave)	+ Approx. \$3.5 Million in Transmission Line Relocation		
Cost	\$	\$0	\$108,600,000	\$979,000,000	\$341,000,000		
Preferred Alternative	Yes/No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes		

Table 4 Proposed Reasonable Alternatives Screening Matrix: Recommended Preferred Alternative

		No-Build	Preferred Alternative
Purpose & Need: 2050 Traffic Analysis	Geometric Deficiencies Resolved	0/30	26/30
	Provides Direct Access to/from I-526 (Yes/No)	Yes	Yes
	Provides Direct Access to/from I-26 (Yes/No)	Yes	No
	Weighted v/c Ratio	> 1.00	< 1.00
	Intersection Delay/LOS	N/A	N Rhett/Virginia Ave, Refer to Table 6.4
	Mainline LOS	F	D/D/C/C/C/C/D
Freshwater Wetland Impact Based on R/W	(Acres)	0	97.7
Critical Area Impact Based on R/W	(Acres)	0	22
Critical Area (Ashley River) Bridge Construction Temporary Access Based on R/W	(Acres)	0	9.1
Pond Impact Based on R/W	(Acres)	0	0.03
Freshwater Stream Impact Based on R/W	(Feet)	0	18,631.7
Floodplains	(Acres)	0	957
Relocations	Residential	0	94
	Businesses	0	16
	Churches	0	1
	Community Facilities	0	2
	Total	0	113
Environmental Justice	Yes/No	No	Yes
Threatened & Endangered Species		0	May Affect, Not Likey to Adversely Affect
Essential Fish Habitat	Yes/No	No	Yes
Cultural Resources	Eligibility for Listing on NRHP	No Effect	No Adverse Effect
Section 4(f) & 6(f)	Yes/No	No	Yes
Utilities	\$	\$0	\$53.5 M
Cost	\$	\$0	\$1.43 B

* The LOS represents the individual sections of the mainline, Refer to Chapter 3

What are the Environmental Consequences of the I-526 LCC WEST Project?

Potential impacts to the natural and human environment were evaluated in detail for the Proposed Reasonable Alternatives and the No-Build Alternative. No impacts to historic properties, farmlands, coastal zones or coastal barriers, or affects to air quality attainment status in the region are anticipated from the Proposed Reasonable Alternatives. In addition, the Proposed Reasonable Alternatives are in conformance with local and regional land use plans.

All Proposed Reasonable Alternatives would impact the Highland Terrace-Liberty Park Community Center and associated recreational facilities, a resource that receives protection under Section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act of 1966. The displacement of the community center would impact local community cohesion because this facility is often used to host events or group gatherings by residents living in the Highland Terrace and Liberty Park neighborhoods, which are Environmental Justice (EJ) communities. The Highland Terrace-Liberty Park Community Center in North Charleston was partially funded through the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) Act, also qualifying it as a Section 6(f) resource. SCDOT is developing mitigation measures in coordination with the affected communities, the Community Advisory Council and the City of North Charleston that would utilize the remaining land to replace the amenities and services impacted by the proposed project. Refer to Appendix H for additional details on project impacts and proposed mitigation. All Proposed Reasonable Alternatives would impact the Russelldale Community Center and its surrounding recreational facilities, a Section 4(f) resource. The displacement of the community center would impact local community cohesion because this facility is often used to host events or gather as a group by residents living in the Russelldale neighborhood.

All of the Proposed Reasonable Alternatives would have potential impacts to socioeconomics, communities, water quality, wetlands and streams, floodplains, threatened and endangered species, relocations, noise, and indirect and cumulative impacts.

Due to the nature of the proposed project study area, complete avoidance of all impacts was is not possible. Mitigation measures are proposed that would minimize or mitigate the potential impacts from the Recommended Preferred Alternative. A list of these can be found in the Environmental Commitment Forms (section following this summary) and in the discussion of each resource in Chapter 4 of the DEIS.

How were the Agencies and Public Involved?

For the development of this project, FHWA and SCDOT coordinated with the following three distinct groups to ensure meaningful involvement and input:

- Federal, state, and local agencies
- The public
- Stakeholders, including public officials, business owners, and other groups with an interest in this project

Public and agency involvement are critical components of the transportation planning process. Engaging these groups at the very early stages helps ensure decisions consider and benefit public needs and preferences, while developing potential alternatives for the proposed project area. Chapter 6 describes all the public and agency involvement efforts used throughout all phases of the project to date.

Agencies

In accordance with Executive Order 13807: Establishing Discipline and Accountability in the Environmental Review and Permitting Process for Infrastructure Projects (August 15, 2017) [[Link to Executive Order 13807](#)], the project will follow the One Federal Decision (OFD) process. The OFD Executive Order requires federal agencies to prepare a single EIS and sign a joint Record of Decision (ROD), sets a goal of a two-year completion date for environmental reviews of major infrastructure projects such as this one, and authorization decisions to be issued within 90 days from the ROD unless an exception applies.

The definition of “major infrastructure project” for purposes of OFD is: an infrastructure project for which multiple authorizations by Federal agencies will be required to proceed with construction, the lead Federal agency has determined that it will prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), 42 U.S.C. 4321 et seq., and the project sponsor has identified the reasonable availability of funds sufficient to complete the project.

Through a Memorandum of Understanding Implementing One Federal Decision Under Executive Order 13807 (MOU) [[Link to Memorandum of Understanding](#)] executed in April 2018, federal agencies agree to actively participate in environmental reviews and communicate with one another in a structured process that starts early in the project development so that agencies can “identify concerns, raise potential issues early in the review process, and identify solutions.” The MOU also calls for cooperation to accomplish several relevant goals. These are:

- Completion of all environmental reviews and permitting within two years;
- Active communication between agencies;
- Concurrent reviews;
- Development of a permitting timetable; and
- A commitment to the process and improvements of the process

Council on Environmental Quality Regulations (40 CFR 1501.5) require that a Lead Federal Agency oversees the preparation of the EIS and that cooperating agencies are identified. This is also consistent with the process described in the MOU. For any transportation project requiring US Department of Transportation approval, 23 USC 139 calls for FHWA to serve as the Lead Agency and allows the project sponsor, SCDOT, to serve as the Joint Lead Agency. Effective interagency coordination is the key to achieving environmentally responsible transportation decisions. FHWA and SCDOT invited Federal and State agencies to be involved in the project as cooperating or participating agencies. Cooperating agencies are agencies with jurisdiction by law or by virtue of special expertise (40 CFR 1501.6) that, at the request of the Lead Agency, assume responsibility for developing information and preparing environmental analyses for which the agency has special expertise. Participating agencies are federal, state, tribal, regional, and local agencies with an interest in the project and specific responsibilities in the process. In accordance with 23 USC 139 participating agencies were to provide information and identify/resolve issues.

An Agency Coordination Plan, Appendix A, was developed to establish a framework for regular communication among the agencies involved in the environmental review process and to ensure an interdisciplinary approach to decision-making. Coordination occurred at the following major concurrence points:

- Agency Coordination Plan/Purpose and Need Statement
- Permitting/Milestone Timetable
- Range of Alternatives/Alternatives Carried Forward
- Preferred Alternative

A total of 18 agency meetings have taken place to date, refer to Appendix A for more detailed information.

While not required by the OFD process, the permitting/milestone timetable was added as a concurrence point to facilitate tracking the schedule. This timetable is required to be reviewed and updated quarterly and no changes have been requested to date. In addition to coordination at these concurrence points, monthly discussions are held regarding key topics such as draft document review, mitigation, general project concerns, and updates on public involvement efforts.

Public

The public involvement effort is intended to establish and maintain communication between the community, SCDOT, and FHWA. To establish an action plan for community involvement, a Public Involvement Plan and an EJ Outreach Strategy were developed.

The key communication tools include:

- Community Project Office - Open house hosted for community in Fall 2019 in Gas Lite Square
- Community Advisory Council (CAC) - 11 meetings held as of September 2020; formed from community members from each of the potentially impacted EJ neighborhoods
- Project Hotline - project information available verbally at any hour of the day
- Scoping and Public Information Meeting - November 2019
- Public Information Virtual Meeting - Available online from November 2019 through January 2020
- Stakeholder Meetings - 6 meetings with local business leaders
- Community Meetings and Pop-up meetings
 - > 8 in North Charleston and 1 in West Ashley in July and October 2016
 - > 4 in North Charleston and 1 in West Ashley in November 2019
- Flyers - June 2019 to March 2020 over 600 flyers were distributed
- Website - www.526lowcountrycorridor.com in English or Spanish
- Social Media - Project-specific Facebook and Twitter accounts
- Newsletters - distributed to property owners within the public outreach area via mail and/or email
- Speakers Bureau - 19 Presentations
- Door-to-door canvassing - to alert the potentially impacted EJ communities about upcoming ways to participate such as Community Drop-Ins or the Community Office Open House.

Stakeholders

The stakeholder group is comprised of representatives from local public agencies (county staffs, municipal staffs, planning organizations, first responders, etc.); local colleges and universities; non-profits; major employers (Boeing, Joint Base Charleston, etc.); owners/operators of local small businesses; owners of substantial numbers of residential rental units in the project area; and some neighborhood representatives. The stakeholder group met two to three times per year over the life of the project. Participants were provided a project update and asked to share information and concerns relevant to the project.

Are there any Areas of Controversy?

The impacts to the Russelldale, Liberty Park, Ferndale, and Highland Terrace neighborhoods (which are EJ communities) and relocations are two areas of concern for this project. The past and foreseeable impacts to these communities have been a major focus of discussion between FHWA, SCDOT, the affected communities, and the CAC. Refer to Chapter 4, Section 4.5 and Appendix G. The following items are areas of controversy:

- Gentrification fears
- Government trust and accountability
 - > Unaddressed issues related to the original I-26 and I-526 construction
 - > Long-term accountability and stewardship after the project is constructed
 - > Fears of future construction projects taking the EJ communities completely

Are there any Unresolved Issues?

- Environmental Justice Community Mitigation Plan: A draft was developed with input from residents via a social needs assessment survey and input from the CAC. Unresolved issues related to the plan include additional support and concurrence for, and finalizing, the following elements that will be addressed in the FEIS/ROD:
 1. Project Oversight Committee for Implementation of Community Livability Plan (#11)
 2. Affordable Housing
 3. Financial Literacy and First-time Home Buyer Counseling
 4. Replacement Recreational Facilities and Amenities
 5. Recreational Programs and Amenities
 6. Connectivity and Bicycle & Pedestrian Safety
 7. College Aid Initiative
 8. School-to-Work Program
 9. Pre-employment Training
 10. Community History Preservation Study
 11. Community Infrastructure Enhancement Plan
- Section 6(f) Mitigation
 - > Addressed by items 4 and 5 under EJ Community Mitigation
- Section 4(f) Mitigation
 - > Addressed by items 4 and 5 under EJ Community Mitigation

What Federal Actions are Required for the Proposed Project?

The following actions will be needed for the proposed project:

- Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act
- Essential Fish Habitat consultation under the Magnuson-Stevens Act;
- Section 106 consultation;
- Section 4(f) evaluation;
- Land conversion under the Section 6(f) of the Land and Water Conservation Fund;
- Section 402 (Clean Water Act of 1972, as amended) National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permit;
- Sections 401 and 404 (Clean Water Act) wetland and stream impact permit;
- Section 9 of the Rivers and Harbors Act of 1899 coordination with the USCG; and
- Section 10 of the Rivers and Harbors Act of 1899 compliance.

What are the Next Steps?

The DEIS will be available for written comments during the 60 day comment period after the date of distribution and the publication of the formal Notice of Availability (NOA) in the Federal Register and local newspapers.

Comments on the DEIS will be accepted until December 31, 2020. A public hearing is scheduled to be held on November 17, 2020, to provide the public an opportunity to review project information and comment on the DEIS. Written and verbal comments will be accepted during the public hearing.

Written comments may also be submitted to:
I-526 Lowcountry Corridor West Project
c/o South Carolina Department of Transportation
Ms. Joy Riley, PE
P.O. Box 191
Columbia, SC 29202-0191

The DEIS, public hearing,
and an online public meeting will
be available at the project's website:
www.526lowcountrycorridor.com

Comments can also be submitted via
info@526LowcountryCorridor.com

The Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) will be completed in late 2021, and FHWA anticipates publishing an FEIS and issuing a Record of Decision (ROD) concurrently in late 2021, pursuant to Public Law 112-141, 126 Stat. 405, Section 1319(b), unless the FHWA determines statutory considerations preclude the issuance of the combined document pursuant to Section 1319.