

**Final Environmental Assessment**

**Steese Expressway/Johansen Expressway Interchange**

**Project No. Z607320000/0002337**

**[FEBRUARY 2021]**

Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facilities,  
Statewide Environmental Office

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Steese Expressway/Johansen Expressway Interchange

Project No. Z607320000/0002337

The environmental review, consultation, and other actions required by applicable federal environmental laws for this project are being, or have been, carried out by DOT&PF pursuant to 23 U.S.C. 327 and the Memorandum of Understanding dated November 3, 2017, and executed between FHWA and DOT&PF.

**Purpose and Need**

***Purpose***

The purpose of the Steese Expressway and Johansen Expressway Interchange is to enhance motorized and non-motorized mobility and user safety at the Steese Expressway and Johansen Expressway intersection and within the influence area of the intersection.

***Need***

Traffic volumes within the project area are among the highest in the City of Fairbanks. The Johansen Expressway serves as a major thoroughfare for traffic moving east and west and provides a prominent link to developable lands, both north and south of the expressway. The Steese Expressway in the project area serves as a principal route for traffic moving north and south between residential and commercial developments. It is also the primary trucking route for access to the North Slope via the Dalton Highway.

**Requested Federal Action**

The DOT&PF is requesting federal action from the Federal Highway Administration, as follows: Supply funding for the proposed project improvements.

In accordance with 23 U.S. Code 327, and pursuant to a Memorandum of Understanding executed on November 3, 2017 between DOT&PF and FHWA, the DOT&PF has assumed the FHWA's responsibilities for ensuring compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and for the environmental review, consultation, or other actions as required by Federal environmental laws on FHWA-funded projects.

**Proposed Action**

DOT&PF proposes to reconstruct the Steese Expressway and Johansen Expressway (Steese-Jo) intersection as a grade-separated Diverging Diamond interchange. In addition, DOT&PF proposes to construct Farmers Loop Connection as a temporary construction access route, to provide bypass traffic

routing around the Steese-Jo intersection. Following construction, the temporary construction route will be removed, while a multi-use pedestrian and bicycle path will remain as a permanent feature. The proposed improvements also include a new snow dump and a stormwater detention pond, both located northwest of the Steese-Jo intersection.

The proposed action was selected as the preferred alternative as it will:

- Significantly decrease delay at the existing Steese-Jo intersection,
- Provide an enhanced bicycle/pedestrian connection between the existing separated pathways on the Johansen Expressway, Steese Expressway and Farmers Loop Road, and
- Efficiently manage traffic during construction.

In addition, the proposed action has the least private property acquisition and costs significantly less to construct than other alternatives evaluated with similar traffic and safety performance.

### **Public and Agency Coordination**

DOT&PF initiated public scoping with an Open House in October 2017, and initiated agency coordination in August 2018. A subsequent Open House was held in December 2018, following refinement of alternatives and design features, to provide an update on the proposed project and its status and to provide opportunity for feedback from the public.

DOT&PF also formed a Project Advisory Committee (PAC) to ensure continued collaboration and information exchange with key stakeholders. The PAC includes staff from DOT&PF, Fairbanks North Star Borough, City of Fairbanks, US Army Corps of Engineers, US Army Garrison, Fort Wainwright and Alaska State Troopers. The PAC met four times between 2017 and 2020 and provided substantial input on the design and development of alternatives.

This EA was made available to the public in October 2020, with review and comment accepted until November 15, 2020.

In addition to advertising through the Alaska Online Public Notices system, advertisements were placed in the Fairbanks Daily News Miner, and letters and emails were sent to Federal, State and local agencies, as well as to representatives of local tribal and Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act corporations.

All public and agency scoping materials, including comments received, may be found in Appendices E and F of the attached Final EA.

## Summary of Effects, Avoidance, Minimization and Mitigation

Anticipated effects of the Proposed Action are summarized in the following table.

Resource	Effect	Applicable Avoidance, Minimization and Mitigation
<b>Land Use &amp; Transportation</b>	Construction would comply operationally with applicable local and state land use and transportation plans. The proposed action includes both motorized and multi-modal transportation improvements.	
<b>Social &amp; Economic Environment</b>	<p>Construction of any of the proposed interchange alternatives would have a minimal effect on the social or economic environment in the area. The project itself is not anticipated to result in project-induced or project-related growth. Each interchange alternative would affect the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints church at the southeast corner of the existing Steese-Jo intersection. This may require acquisition of the parcel and relocation of the facility to a new location. Any such relocation would be coordinated with the church's management authorities and subject to Federal and State relocation regulations and guidelines, such as the Uniform Relocation Assistance Real Property Acquisition Policies Act (1970).</p> <p>Temporary effects during construction would include a small boost to the local economy due to construction purchases, employment and activity. Temporary and indirect effects may also include impacts to local businesses from access and traffic changes. The lack of demonstrable concentrations of low-income or minority populations negates the possibility of any environmental justice concerns. There will be no disproportionate impact to minority or low-income population groups.</p>	Farmers Loop Connection is now proposed as a temporary construction road, to limit traffic impacts to the community on Farmers Loop Extension to the construction duration only.
<b>Contaminated Sites, Hazardous</b>	Construction of the proposed action includes an incremental increased risk of encountering previously contaminated soils or groundwater in the project area.	DOT&PF's Contractor will operate with an approved Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plan and Hazardous Materials Control Plan, will integrate Best Management

Resource	Effect	Applicable Avoidance, Minimization and Mitigation
<b>Materials &amp; Pollution Prevention</b>	Temporary effects during construction include an incremental increase in the risk of accidental release of contaminants into the surrounding environment.	<p>Practices (BMPs) as appropriate, and will comply with ADEC requirements for working in areas of contamination and for handling contaminants.</p> <p>Should unanticipated contaminated soil or groundwater be encountered during construction activities, DOT&amp;PF's Contractor will coordinate with DOT&amp;PF and ADEC to determine an appropriate course of action before proceeding with excavation, transfer or other manipulation of contaminated or potentially contaminated soils or groundwater.</p>
<b>Floodplains, Waterways &amp; Water Quality</b>	The proposed action is unlikely to affect floodplains, flood flow, local waterways or water quality. The project falls partially within the mapped Chena Lakes Flood Control boundary, and the area has 'reduced flood risk due to levee'. Drainage from the proposed improvements will not be directed via collector systems to either Isabella Creek, Noyes Slough or Chena River; rather, drainage will be designed to feed into and replenish the wetland complex northwest of the project area.	
<b>Flora &amp; Fauna</b>	<p>Construction will have some effect on local flora and fauna, primarily due to habitat loss or conversion. The proposed action enlarges the existing intersection footprint.</p> <p>During construction, the native terrain within the Farmers Loop construction access road footprint will be converted to road. Following construction, the asphalt will be removed and the area reseeded with native species.</p>	<p>To avoid unnecessary impacts to flora and fauna, the proposed action is using as much of the existing intersection footprint as possible while meeting design criteria for the Diverging Diamond Interchange.</p> <p>To avoid impacts to migratory birds, DOT&amp;PF's Contractor will follow the vegetation clearing timing guidelines supplied by US Fish &amp; Wildlife Service. In the unlikely event that bald or golden eagle nests are identified within 660 feet of the project area, DOT&amp;PF will consult with USFWS on construction activities and measures to avoid impacts on the eagles and their nests.</p>

Resource	Effect	Applicable Avoidance, Minimization and Mitigation
		<p>To minimize habitat fragmentation, the Farmers Loop Connection will be a temporary construction access road; following construction, the roadbed will be removed and the area reseeded with native species. The permanent multi-use path along the Farmers Loop Connection will have slopes seeded with native species.</p> <p>To minimize the risk of invasive species spread, DOT&amp;PF's Contractor will see side slopes with an approved seed mix containing no invasive species.</p>
<b>Visual Resources &amp; Aesthetics</b>	<p>The proposed action will have some minimal effect on aesthetics and visual resources in the project area. Grade separation of the intersection will affect east-looking views along Johansen Expressway. The grade-separated intersection may also be visible from some of the residences southeast of the intersection. Views from Birch Hill will have modest differences. The intersection and project area are already developed, however the character of the intersection will be slightly different.</p>	<p>Visual impacts will be minimized by using as much of the existing Steese-Jo intersection footprint as possible, and by removing the temporary roadbed on Farmers Loop Connection, leaving only the multi-use pathway and reseeding the remaining area with native species.</p>
<b>Section 4(f) Resources</b>	<p>Section 4(f) resources in the project area are limited to the separated multi-use path along Steese Highway and Johansen Expressway. Construction of the proposed action will improve this Section 4(f) property, by providing improved connectivity and safety improvements at the intersection crossings.</p>	
<b>Air Quality</b>	<p>Construction of the proposed action is expected to result in improved air quality in the vicinity, particularly during winter months. The proposed action will lead to improved level of service and reduced delay and vehicle idling, which will translate into reduced carbon monoxide concentrations.</p> <p>Temporary effects during construction may include air quality concerns such as fugitive dust emissions.</p>	<p>DOT&amp;PF's Contractor will minimize temporary construction-related emissions to the extent feasible through implementation of BMPs, such as emission reduction and fugitive dust control.</p>

Resource	Effect	Applicable Avoidance, Minimization and Mitigation
<b>Noise</b>	<p>Construction of the proposed action will lead to noise impacts to at least 16 properties, and seven additional properties would approach noise abatement criteria thresholds.</p> <p>Temporary effects during construction may include increases in noise due to construction activity, as well as noise increases along Farmers Loop Extension from diverted traffic on the temporary bypass.</p>	<p>Mitigation to offset anticipated noise levels following construction has been evaluated. Noise reduction mechanisms, including barriers, were evaluated and a noise barrier along Steese Expressway was found to be both feasible and reasonable. A noise barrier that is expected to reduce noise levels by 7 to 12 dBA is currently proposed and will be constructed if agreed upon by affected property owners in accordance with the State of Alaska DOT&amp;PF Noise Policy.</p> <p>Noise generating construction activities would be limited to the hours of 7 am to 10 pm, in compliance with the City of Fairbanks ordinances regarding noise, unless a noise variance is granted.</p>
<b>Wetlands &amp; Drainage</b>	<p>The proposed actions would involve wetland impacts. The intersection itself would require filling in 0.04 acres of wetlands, comprised of an isolated wetland area south of Lazelle Road. In addition, the proposed action includes a snow dump and a drainage pond northwest of the intersection. These features will affect local hydrology, including providing additional hydrologic inputs to the open water pond and wetland fringe within the conservation easement.</p>	<p>Measures to avoid wetland impacts include relying on the existing Steese-Jo intersection footprint as much as possible, and including retaining walls in the design to avoid fill slopes in the open water pond and wetland fringe northwest of the intersection.</p> <p>Design improvements to promote drainage at the intersection will provide improved hydrology to the wetlands northwest of the Steese-Jo. Construction of a snow dump off of Farmers Loop Extension will also provide additional hydrologic inputs to these wetlands.</p> <p>The Farmers Loop temporary construction road will include design features to promote lateral drainage, to ensure that the access road does not reduce hydrologic connectivity.</p>
<b>Right-of-Way</b>	<p>Construction of the proposed action will require partial acquisition of five parcels, and will not require any full parcel acquisition. However, the proximity of the Church of Jesus</p>	<p>Because the proposed action would involve placement of intersection improvements in close proximity to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, DOT&amp;PF will</p>

Resource	Effect	Applicable Avoidance, Minimization and Mitigation
	<p>Christ of Latter-day Saints to the proposed intersection may necessitate relocation of the church. The temporary Farmers Loop construction road and permanent multi-use facility will require partial acquisition of 3 parcels. In addition, the snow storage and stormwater pond features will require acquisition of 5.6 total acres of vacant land northwest of the intersection.</p>	<p>work with the church’s authorities on a relocation package that satisfies the Uniform Act.</p>
<p><b>Historic, Archaeological and Cultural Resources</b></p>	<p>The proposed action will have no physical or visual effect on prehistoric, historic or cultural resources, as there are no such resources in the project area.</p>	<p>Should construction activities, most notably excavation, encounter evidence of a previously unknown cultural resource, construction activities would stop in that area, and DOT&amp;PF would proceed in accordance with Appendix F of the First Amended Programmatic Agreement among the Federal Highway Association, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the State Historic Preservation Officer, and the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities Regarding Implementation of Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act for the Federal-Aid Highway Program in Alaska.</p>
<p><b>Cumulative Impacts</b></p>	<p>Construction of the proposed action, including the temporary construction road, may accelerate or increase the likelihood of development northwest of the Steese-Jo intersection. This area is platted for subdivision, including a connector road between Northside Boulevard and Farmers Loop Extension and is currently being developed for gravel and peat extraction.</p>	



## Required Permits or Approvals

This Finding of No Significant Impact is based on:

**National Historic Preservation Act, Section 106:** Concurrence from the State Historic Preservation Officer on January 23, 2020 that no historic properties will be affected by the proposed action.

**Clean Water Act, Section 404/10:** A permit for placement of fill within Waters of the U.S., including wetlands, will be required from U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

**Migratory Bird Treaty Act:** Compliance with terms of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, including the USFWS' recommended timing for vegetation clearing.

**Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act:** Compliance with terms of this act, including identification of any potential bald or golden eagle nests within 660 feet of the project area and subsequent consultation with USFWS.

**Clean Water Act, Section 401:** Certificate of Reasonable Assurance will be issued by AK Department of Environmental Conservation, Division of Water Quality concurrently with the Section 404 permit (above).

**Clean Water Act, Section 402:** Compliance with the terms of the Alaska Pollutant Discharge Elimination System, subsequent to completion of a Storm Water Pollution Prevention Plan and notice of intent to operate under a Construction General Permit.

**Temporary Water Use Permit:** Should dewatering be necessary for construction, the proposed action will require a Temporary Water Use Permit from AK Department of Natural Resources.

## Finding and Approval

The DOT&PF Statewide Environmental Office (SEO) has determined that the Proposed Action selected in this decision, consisting of replacement of the existing at-grade Steese-Jo intersection with a grade-separated Diverging Diamond Interchange, will have no significant impact on the human environment. This Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) is based on the attached Final EA, which the SEO independently evaluated and determined the documents adequately and accurately discuss the need, environmental issues, and impacts of the proposed project and appropriate mitigation measures. The EA complies with Executive Orders: E.O. 12898, Environmental Justice; E.O. 11988, Floodplain Management; E.O. 11990, Protection of Wetlands; E.O. 13175 Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal Governments; and E.O. 13112, Invasive Species, as amended by E.O. 13751.

The EA and supporting documents provide sufficient evidence and analysis to determine that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required. The SEO assumes full responsibility for the content, scope and accuracy of the Final EA and all associated consultation.

I have carefully and thoroughly considered the facts contained in the attached EA. Based on the information provided therein, I have found that the proposed action is consistent with existing national environmental policies and objectives as set forth in Section 101(a) of the National Environmental Policy

Act (NEPA) and other applicable regulations and requirements. I also find that the proposed action will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment or include any condition requiring consultation pursuant to Section 102(2)(c) of NEPA. Based on this, DOT&PFSEO will not prepare an EIS for this action.

2/22/2021

Date



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