

1.0 Introduction and Planning Process

This report summarizes the findings of the Los Lunas Corridor Study (LLCS). The LLCS encompasses an east-west corridor along NM 6/Main Street in the Village of Los Lunas, Valencia County, New Mexico. The study area is generally bounded on the north by the northern limits of the Village, on the east by NM Highway 47, on the south by Miller Road/South El Cerro Loop, and on the west by I-25. This study area primarily consists of the incorporated areas of Los Lunas along with unincorporated areas within Valencia County. A small portion of the northeast and southwest parts of the study area are within the Town of Peralta and City of Belen, respectfully. The project study area and vicinity are shown in Figure 1.

The LLCS was led by the Mid-Region Council of Governments (MRCOG) on behalf of and in collaboration with the Village of Los Lunas. Because the LLCS indirectly affects several state highways and was funded using state funds, the New Mexico Department of Transportation (NMDOT) also participated in the study. The City of Belen, Town of Peralta, and the Town of Tomé Land Grant were also active participants.

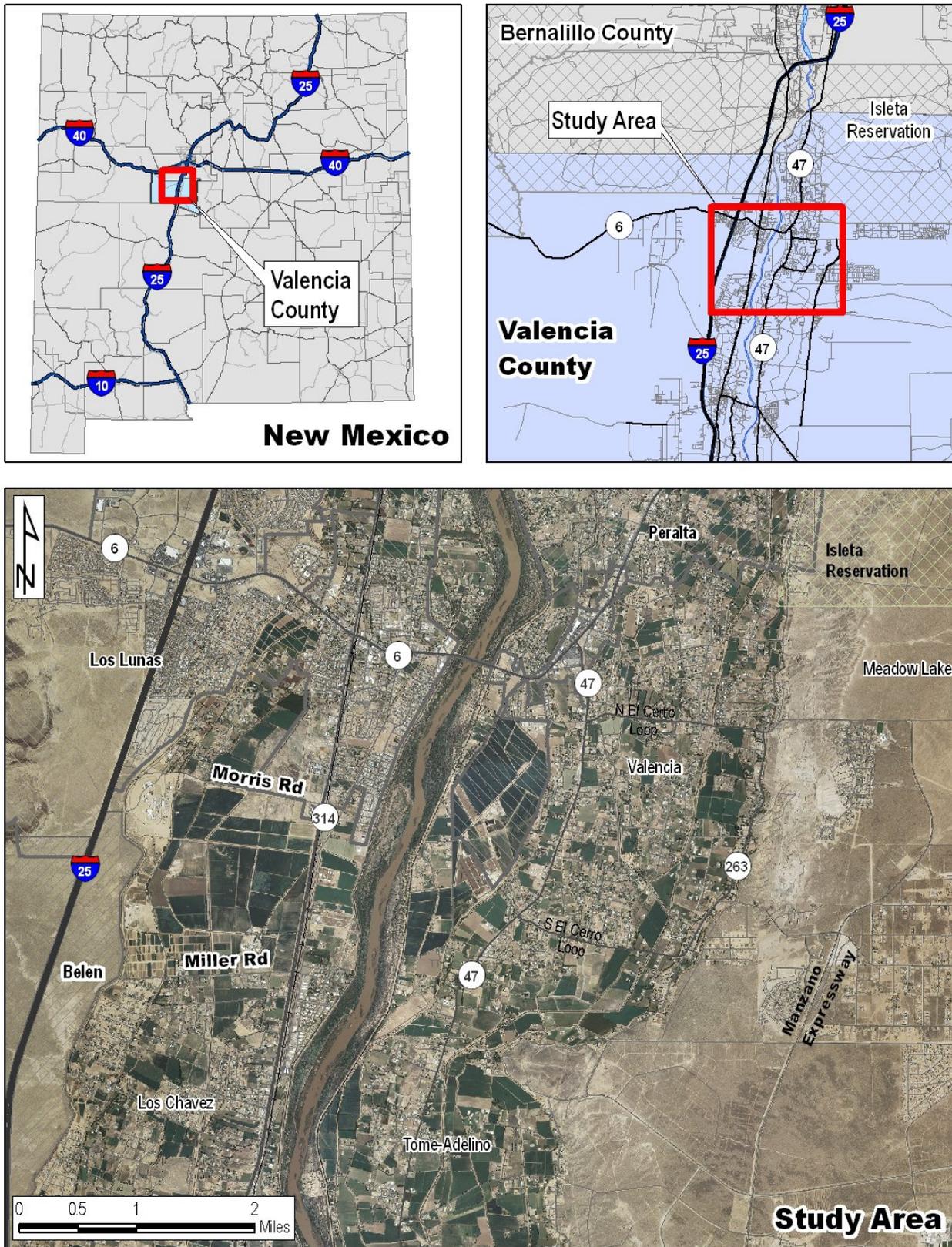
The foundation of the LLCS was an assessment of transportation problems and needs associated with the NM 6 corridor within the Village of Los Lunas and surrounding unincorporated areas of Valencia County. The focus of the LLCS was the need for an additional east-west roadway that would connect to existing north-south highways and would provide a second access point to I-25. The need for a new roadway is to improve: (1) traffic flow on NM 6; (2) access to high growth areas within the study area; and (3) the efficiency of emergency response within the Village of Los Lunas and surrounding areas. NM 6 is the only major east-west highway within a 20-mile wide swath that spans the Rio Grande and has direct access to I-25. Consequently, it is heavily used by commuters travelling to jobs in Bernalillo County and by area residents accessing local businesses, schools, and jobs in Los Lunas. Traffic flows on NM 6 are nearing the capacity of the existing roadway and are projected to exceed capacity within the near future. The resulting congestion will adversely affect commuter travel; access to area businesses, schools, and services located along NM 6; and the ability to respond quickly to emergency situations. Further information and discussion of these issues is provided in Section 1.2.

Current funding programmed for the LLCS is limited to completing the corridor study, the preparation of preliminary design plans and right-of-way maps, and the acquisition of critical right-of-way, as needed. Funds for construction have not been identified or programmed nor are adequate funds expected to be available to the Village and State in the next few years. For this reason, MRCOG, the Village of Los Lunas, and the NMDOT intend to use the study process to identify a preferred alternative and to prepare preliminary design and right-of-way plans. The preliminary plans will be used to preserve the necessary right-of-way for the recommended alternative for future implementation. Preservation will protect the preferred alternative from development that could impede the ability and/or cost to implement a future project when construction funds become available.

1.1 Project Background and Planning Process

The LLCS is a follow-up study to the *Valencia County Mobility Plan (VCMP)*, the long-range transportation plan for Valencia County. The VCMP was completed in 2006 and was last updated in August 2008. The VCMP was led by the MRCOG and a Valencia County Transportation Steering Committee. MRCOG is the regional planning agency for the four-county area including Bernalillo, Valencia, Torrance, and Sandoval Counties. Because many of the major transportation issues facing the county affect state highways, primary funding for the VCMP was provided by the NMDOT.

Figure 1: LLCS Location and Study Area



The VCMP included an assessment of the existing transportation network within Valencia County based on traffic projections for the year 2030. That assessment identified congestion problems on the segment of NM 6 through the Village of Los Lunas, as well as other major routes within the Los Lunas area including NM 47 north of the NM 6/NM 47 intersection, NM 47 approaching NM 263 (North El Cerro Road), and NM 314 between Los Lunas and Isleta Pueblo.

As a potential solution to the projected congestion problems, one of the proposed transportation strategies identified by the VCMP consisted of a new east-west arterial, river crossing, and interchange at I-25 as a near-term priority (year 2018) transportation need (page 45 of the VCMP). The specific language included in this Plan relevant to the LLCS states:

Construct a new I-25 access point in the vicinity of Morris/Miller Road and connect it to an east-west river crossing which extends east to Manzano Expressway in the vicinity of South El Cerro Loop. The initial study for this East/West corridor should evaluate the potential for this ultimate alignment to lie anywhere between Miller and Morris Roads. The transportation corridor study and project development process for this corridor will identify a specific alignment, address multi-modal needs, determine the number of lanes, and identify appropriate mitigation measures to reduce impacts to the surrounding communities. The study should include an alternative that evaluates the potential for constructing multiple river crossings using low-profile, two-lane roadways that connect existing facilities.

The Village of Los Lunas is within the Albuquerque Metropolitan Planning Area (AMPA). The 2035 Metropolitan Transportation Plan (2035 MTP) for AMPA includes a new interchange, east-west arterial, and river crossing consistent with the findings and recommendations of the VCMP. The 2035 MTP has been adopted by the Metropolitan Transportation Board and approved by FHWA and the Federal Transit Administration.

The process followed by the LLCS adhered to the NMDOT's *Location Study Procedures* (LSP) and *Planning and Environmental Linkages* (PEL) process adopted by the NMDOT. The LSP and PEL provide guidance to the NMDOT and local governments for early project development through the NEPA phase. In addition to these two processes, the study process was modified to comply with the requirements of the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) specific to the Clean Water Act (CWA). Because the crossing of the Rio Grande would require a CWA Section 404 permit, the analyses and coordination specified in Section 404(b)(1) of the CWA were followed as part of the overall corridor study.

Funding programmed for the LLCS is limited to the preparation of the AA and preliminary design plans and the acquisition of right-of-way, as needed. Funds for major construction activities have not been secured. For this reason, Los Lunas, MRCOG, and the NMDOT intend to use the AA process to preserve a corridor for future implementation. Preservation will protect the locally-preferred alternative from development that could impede the ability and/or cost to implement a project when funds become available.

1.2 Agency Coordination and Public Involvement

The LLCS included extensive involvement of many stakeholders. Stakeholder involvement began at the onset of the study and continued through the selection of the preferred alternative. Stakeholders included the various jurisdictions affected by the proposed project, agencies with jurisdiction over resources or having an interest in the issues found within the study area, and area businesses, land owners, and residents. The methods and activities used to involve stakeholders are summarized below. A copy of agency coordination and public involvement activities is on file with the MRCOG.

Agency Coordination

Agency coordination consisted of several activities and methods including an interagency Steering Committee, correspondence and meetings with individual agencies, and briefings to jurisdictions. The Steering Committee was set up at the onset of the study and included representatives from agencies and jurisdictions with a potential interest in the project. The invited participants included MRCOG, NMDOT, Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), USACE, Village of Los Lunas, Valencia County, City of Belen, Town of Peralta, Town of Tomé Land Grant, Senator Jeff Bingaman's office, and consultant team members. A total of 18 Steering Committee meetings were held. Meetings were held to discuss the study process, potential alignments and alternatives, evaluation criteria, analysis findings, public involvement and agency coordination activities, and impacts to property and the environment.

In addition to the Steering Committee, scoping letters were sent to other agencies having jurisdiction and/or interests in the study area. Notice of the study and a scoping request were sent to:

- New Mexico Office of Cultural Affairs Historic Preservation Division (SHPO) for issues involving historic resources;
- Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District (MRGCD) for interests involving the irrigation and drainage system within the study area;
- New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) for issues involving hazardous waste, air quality, and water quality;
- New Mexico Department of Game & Fish (NMGF) for animal and habitat issues;
- Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for farmland issues;
- USACE for issues associated with the river crossing and other waters under their jurisdiction; and
- US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) for issues specific to the Endangered Species Act.

The notice and scoping letters described the proposed project and its purpose, requested input on issues of concern and interest, and included a map with the potential alternatives. The agencies were invited to a scoping meeting held on October 18, 2010. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the project purpose and need, potential alternatives, and evaluation process and to identify issues of potential significance.

The scoping process identified several agencies and entities that required follow-up discussions and meetings. These included the State of New Mexico General Services Department (GSD), New Mexico State University (NMSU), Central New Mexico Correctional Facility (CNMCF), and USACE. The GSD has responsibility for the lands occupied by the CNMCF. The CNMCF is a state-operated adult prison that includes a reception and diagnostic center, a mental health treatment center, and an adult inmate center. The overall facility, including farmlands owned and operated by the state as part of the correctional facility, occupies over 1,000 acres. The NMSU Los Lunas Agricultural Science Center adjoins the CNMCF property and is an agricultural research facility. Due to their location within the study area, both of these state facilities could be affected by project alternatives.

As mentioned previously, a crossing of the Rio Grande, as well as some drainages and canals, will require a permit from the USACE. Because the USACE has an alternatives analysis process mandated by the Clean Water Act, the LLCS was coordinated closely with this agency to ensure the analysis and

documentation process would meet their requirements. The coordination effort with the USACE included information submittals and their concurrence at three points of the process. The submittals to the USACE and their concurrence are on file with the MRCOG.

Local elected officials were briefed at key milestones. Briefings to provide status reports and to obtain input were made to the Los Lunas Village Council (7 briefings), Valencia County Commission (6 briefings), Belen City Council (5 briefings), Bosque Farms Village Council (2 briefings), Peralta Town Council (3 briefings), and Valencia County Intergovernmental Collaborative Task Force (2 briefings). The recommended alternative that resulted from the LLCS was presented to the Village of Los Lunas Council, Belen City Council, and the Valencia County Commission for adoption in the fall of 2011. Copies of the adopted resolutions are included in Appendix A.

Public Involvement

Public involvement for the study was implemented to assist the Project Team in the identification of issues and the identification and evaluation of potential alternatives and to obtain feedback on analysis findings and recommendations. Public involvement efforts centered on three methods: (1) the use of a Citizens Advisory Committee; (2) community-wide public meetings; and (3) small group meetings with individual landowners, neighborhoods, and interest groups. In addition to these efforts, a public opinion survey was conducted to help identify public sentiment about the project and to identify critical issues.

The first method used for public involvement was the use of a Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC). The CAC was established at the study onset. Its composition was set to represent the various communities/neighborhoods within the study area. Representatives were identified based on the recommendations of local elected officials and nominations from the affected communities/neighborhoods. The communities/neighborhoods represented on the CAC included:

- Community of Los Chavez
- Mid Valley Air Park neighborhood
- Huning Ranch neighborhood
- Town of Peralta
- Village of Bosque Farms
- Meadow Lake community
- El Cerro Loop neighborhoods
- Neighborhoods between NM 47 and the Rio Grande
- Historic Tomé-Adelino neighborhood
- NM 6/Main Street Businesses

In addition to the communities/neighborhoods listed above, individuals were invited on the CAC to represent interests, such as economic development, business, agricultural, water, cultural, or emergency response. In some instances, the same individual represented specific issues as well as their community/neighborhood.

The role of each member of the CAC was to act as a conduit of information between the Project Team and the broader public constituency that each represented. CAC meetings were held as information was available for review and discussion. A total of 15 meetings were held.

The second method used for public involvement was community-wide public meetings. Four public meetings were held through the alternatives analysis process. All meetings were held at the Los Lunas Transportation Center in Los Lunas and were conducted as an open house from 4:00 to 8:00 PM. The typical format followed for meetings included handout information, meeting displays, and a continuous loop presentation. Project Team staff were positioned at stations to explain the display information and to discuss issues. As they entered the room, meeting participants were asked to mark their residence or business on a large schematic map to identify where they came from and to gauge the extent of community interest in the study by geographic location.

A station for comments was available. It included a table for writing individual comments and flip charts for recording comments made to a Project Team representative. All comments recorded on the flip charts were posted in the meeting room to allow for viewing by the meeting participants.

The meetings were advertised in local newspapers including the *Albuquerque Journal* and *Valencia County News-Bulletin* and were posted as notices in the "Los Lunas Village Newsletter." Flyers were also distributed to businesses along NM 6 and to the project contact list via mail or email. In addition, press releases were provided to local newspapers. For most meetings, the *Valencia County News-Bulletin* ran stories about the project. Overall, the meetings were attended by approximately 629 persons.

The first public information meeting was held on August 25, 2009. The objective of the meeting was to inform the public that the study was underway, to provide the public with information about the need for the study and what it was intended to accomplish, and to obtain community input on issues and factors to consider during the study. Approximately 150 people attended the meeting, including area residents, business owners, landowners, and elected officials. Comments received included: 61 comments recorded on flip charts, 46 written comments on Post-It notes that were placed on an aerial map of the study area, and 67 written comments received on comment forms at the meeting or via mail or email within the 2-week comment period following the meeting.

The second public meeting was held on January 26, 2010. The objective of this meeting was to update the public on the progress of the study, to keep them involved in the process, to present the alternatives under consideration, and to obtain community input on these alternatives. Approximately 240 people attended the second meeting. Sixty-one comments were recorded on flip charts at the meeting, and 76 were received on comment forms at the meeting or via mail or email within the 2-week comment period following the meeting.

The third public meeting was held on September 21, 2010. The objective of this meeting was to present updated information about the project, including the project purpose and need and revisions made to the alignment alternatives, and to present the findings of the ongoing analysis process. Approximately 184 people attended the meeting. Forty-five comments were recorded on flip charts at the meeting, and 73 written comments were received on comment forms at the meeting or via mail or email within the 2-week comment period following the meeting.

The fourth public meeting was held on August 17, 2011. This meeting presented the findings of the alternatives analysis and presented the recommendations of the Project Team and Steering Committee. Approximately 155 people attended the meeting. A total of 97 written comments were received at and following the meeting. These included 51 comments recorded on flip-charts at the meeting, 25 comment forms returned at the end of the meeting, and 21 comments received by mail and email within the 2-week comment period following the meeting.

Because the fourth public meeting included findings and recommendations specific to the final evaluation of alternatives, meeting participants were asked for their preference regarding the project alternatives. Of the 97 comments received, 61 included an explicit preference for an alternative as follows: 8 preferred the Miller A Alternative, 37 preferred the Morris B Alternative, 6 preferred the Morris D Alternative, 5 selected the Morris alternatives without a preference for either Morris B or D, and 5 people stated a preference for a No-Build action. For a description of these alternatives, see Section 3 and 4 of this document.

The third method used for public involvement was small group meetings. Project Team representatives met with various neighborhood groups and interest groups, including Rio Communities Association, Tierra Grande Board, Rotary Club of Los Lunas, Huning Ranch, Western Heights Neighborhood Watch, and Los Chavez Community Association. The briefings provided information about the study, its purpose and need, and how to get involved in the study process. Individual briefings were offered to other neighborhoods and groups within the study area. However, these groups did not respond to this offer.

As specific routes were identified and evaluated, notices were mailed to property owners and landowners whose property could be impacted by the project. These letters served to inform landowners of the potential for their property to be acquired and offered to meet with them to discuss issues and concerns. This effort resulted in a request to meet from approximately 20 individuals, businesses, and landowners.

Hundreds of public comments regarding the project were submitted over the course of the LLCS. All comments received in response to public meetings, individuals, elected officials, and others were reviewed and discussed by the Project Team and Steering Committee. This input was used to identify issues of concern and to identify and evaluate project alternatives and evaluation criteria.

In addition to the above public involvement activities, a public opinion survey was conducted in April 2010 to gauge whether input received from public involvement activities reflected the opinions of the overall community. The survey was conducted by Research & Polling, an independent party, and covered the study area. The survey was designed to be statistically valid at a 95% (+/-5%) confidence level. Key findings of the survey are below. A copy of the survey is on file with the MRCOG.

- About two-thirds (65%) of those surveyed feel traffic congestion in the Los Lunas area is a serious problem, particularly on Main Street (NM 6).
- When asked "What is currently the biggest problem facing people in the community," 39% of respondents mention traffic-related issues.
- Support levels for constructing an additional river crossing located somewhere between Miller Road and Morris Road are high, as four-fifths of residents either strongly support (60%) or somewhat support (20%) the proposed roadway and river crossing.
- The majority (64%) of those who have an opinion about the proposed project say they support it because Los Lunas needs an additional river crossing to relieve traffic.
- Other top reasons for supporting an additional river crossing relate to faster commute times for residents (16%) and improved emergency response access (9%) and time.
- Seven percent (7%) of those polled are opposed to an additional river crossing.

Lastly, information about the Los Lunas Corridor Study was posted on the MRCOG website at www.mrcog-nm.gov/ under Transportation/Rural Planning. The website contained information about the study background, activities, and process, as well as the various documents pertaining to the study. Direct links to the MRCOG website were also included on the home pages of the Village of Los Lunas and Valencia County websites.