



U.S. Department of Transportation
**Federal Highway
Administration**

Finding of No Significant Impact

Pharr-Reynosa International Bridge Expansion, Pharr District

At Pharr-International Bridge

CSJ: 0921-02-479

Hidalgo County, Texas

November 2023

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has determined that the construction, expansion and operation of the Pharr-Reynosa International Bridge (Bridge) will not have a significant impact on the human or natural environment. This Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the Preferred Alternative is based on the September 2023 final Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Pharr-Reynosa International Bridge Expansion Project in accordance with 23 Code of Federal Register (CFR) §771.119 and §771.121. The draft EA was previously approved by FHWA, and a Notice of Availability and Opportunity for Public Hearing was published in The Monitor and El Periódico USA on July 26, 2023. The Notice indicated a request for a public hearing was to be received by August 25, 2023 at 5:00 pm. No requests for a public hearing were received. The final EA was approved by FHWA for public involvement on September 20, 2023.

The September 2023 final EA has been independently evaluated by the FHWA and was determined to have accurately discussed the need, purpose, alternatives, environmental issues, and impacts of the proposed Pharr-Reynosa International Bridge Expansion Project and appropriate mitigation measures. These documents provide sufficient evidence and analysis for determining that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required. Finally, the document is incorporated by reference into this decisional document.

2.0 PROJECT BACKGROUND

The existing Bridge is a tolled bridge with four 12-foot travel lanes, with three travelling north and one travelling south. There is no median located between the north bound and south bound main lanes. A former sidewalk, converted into a three-foot safety refuge for drivers of disabled vehicles, is located on the eastern side of the Bridge. Near the northern project terminus, the roadway separates into three processing lanes inside the Pharr Port of Entry (POE), to and from Mexico, for the United States (U.S.) Customs and Border Protection. The southern terminus of the project is located at the U.S. and Mexico border (Rio Grande). The Bridge was originally intended as a twin bridge crossing; however, only a single four-lane bridge was constructed, and has been in operation since 1995.

The proposed improvements will construct an approximate 1.35-mile long second bridge adjacent to and west of the existing Bridge within a 140-foot right-of-way (ROW). The new bridge would accommodate commercial and non-commercial traffic in both directions of travel.

The proposed project is needed because northbound traffic—particularly rapidly growing commercial traffic—on the existing Bridge has become increasingly congested, creating a bottleneck as it enters the Pharr POE.

The purpose of the proposed project or solutions to the need, identified in the EA, is to accommodate increasing traffic volume, improve mobility, reduce congestion and wait times, enhance safety, and allow for efficient separation of different types of traffic at the approach to the POE.

In addition to improving mobility, reducing congestion, and promoting safety, the proposed project will also provide a significant economic benefit. According to TxDOT's Texas-Mexico Border Transportation Master Plan 2021, cross-border trade between Texas and Mexico generates more than \$268 billion annually in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth. An estimated 97% of that is due to the movement of goods. Another economic benefit associated with the proposed project is job creation. Currently, TxDOT estimates the movement of goods and people across the Texas-Mexico border generates approximately five million jobs (3.4 million in Mexico and 1.5 million in the U.S.). TxDOT predicts that, without improvements, by 2050, delays to the movement of goods through the Pharr-Reynosa International Bridge would reduce GDP by \$594.1 million (\$209.4 million to the U.S., \$384.7 million to Mexico).

The Pharr-Reynosa International Bridge Expansion Project was developed in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, Council of Environmental Quality (CEQ) Regulation for Implementing the Procedural Provisions of NEPA (40 CFR 1500-1508), FHWA Environmental Impact and Related Procedures (23 CFR 771) and Public Involvement Rules (43 TAC Chapter 2) and other related federal and state requirements.

This project had an EA prepared in 1993 by the City of Pharr and the General Services Administration (GSA), originally to construct a new four-lane vehicular, reinforced concrete bridge, to serve as an international crossing between Mexico and the U.S., associated Federal Inspection Service facility, and approach road. A Presidential Permit was issued by the Department of State in 1978 for the construction of the existing Bridge. The existing Bridge opened to traffic in 1995.

This project is an added capacity international bridge project, which expands a single four lane Bridge structure to double four lane bridge structures. This project is in the Rio Grande Valley Metropolitan Planning Organization (RGVMPO) and would require approximately 0.06 acres of new ROW. Under 23 CFR 771.115 (a) this project is not classified as a Class I (EISs) action that significantly affects the environment.

This project was processed as an EA for the follow reasons:

1. The project was anticipated to follow the current alignment of the existing Pharr International Bridge;
2. the project would primarily be constructed within existing ROW;
3. the environmental studies conducted for this project did not reveal any potentially significant impacts;
4. coordination with local, state, and federal resource agencies for NEPA compliance is complete. Although permits are not yet in hand (i.e., U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, International Boundary and Water Commission), they will be obtained prior to construction. Therefore, NEPA requirements have been satisfied up to this point; and
5. the project is included in the Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP) and the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) of the federally required transportation planning process of the RGVMPO.

Therefore, the EA was prepared to identify the environmental impacts of this project and for FHWA, then to determine whether an EIS was required or whether the EA was sufficient.

3.0 REVIEW OF THE EA

After the Notice Affording an Opportunity for a Public Hearing was offered, and no requests from the public were received, the City of Pharr updated and finalized the EA for FHWA approval, which occurred in September 2023. The final EA considered and analyzed the potential social, economic, and environmental impacts related to the proposed improvements to the existing Bridge. Specifically, the EA studied the potential impacts associated with the Build and No Build Alternatives.

The potential impacts studied include direct, indirect and cumulative impacts of the project. Direct effects are defined by the CEQ regulations (40 CFR §1508) as being “caused by the action and occur at the same time and place”. Indirect effects are defined as effects that are “caused by an action and occur later in time or farther removed in distance but are still reasonably foreseeable” and may “include growth-inducing effects and other effects related to induced changes in the pattern of land use, population density or growth rate, and related effects on air and water and other natural systems, including ecosystems.” Cumulative impacts are the incremental impacts the project’s direct or indirect effects have on a resource in the context of the myriad of other past, present, and future effects on that resource from unrelated activities.

During the alternative analysis process, described in detail in Section 4.0 of the EA, two alternatives were studied: the Build and No Build Alternatives. The No Build Alternative assumes no improvements to the existing Bridge and did not address the anticipated increase of international traffic flow on the existing Bridge. This alternative did not meet the need and purpose of the proposed project.

The Build Alternative meets the purpose and need of the project, improves safety, accommodates the projected increase in traffic volume and improves mobility. The City of Pharr, in cooperation with TxDOT and FHWA, recommends the approval of the Build Alternative as discussed below.

The Build Alternative would add a second adjacent ‘twin’ structure, which would consist of a 1.35-mile-long structure adjacent to and west of the existing Bridge, built primarily within City of Pharr-owned ROW. A total of approximately 0.06 acres of ROW along the east side of the existing Bridge would be acquired. Construction would include four, 12-foot, travel lanes with a seven-foot-wide striped shoulder on the west side with features that would include one crossover, and additional lighting and electronic signage that would facilitate the flow of traffic, reduce wait times, and enhance safety. No relocations or displacement will occur.

The vegetation within the project area is agricultural (approximately 16.40 acres) and disturbed prairie (approximately 5.32 acres). The remaining vegetation is urban (13.50 acres). There will be minimal impacts to prime farmlands and floodplains. No impact to critical vegetation communities, listed threatened and endangered species, or mature woody vegetation, are anticipated. The project is not anticipated to substantially impact any federal-

listed species, state-listed species, or Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCNs). Any impact to individuals of a species would be incidental in nature. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) recommended Best Management Practices (BMPs) would be implemented in an effort to avoid impacts to these species. No cultural resources have been identified as being impacted.

A total of 403 linear feet (0.74 acres) of waters of the U.S. were identified within the proposed project area, of which 80 linear feet (0.1102 acres) will be temporarily impacted and 20 linear feet and (0.0023 acres) will be permanently impacted. The impacts to waters of the U.S. will be processed under a non-reporting Nationwide Permit (NWP) No. 15.

The Rio Grande is a navigable waterway and is subject to the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) jurisdiction; therefore, a USCG permit will be obtained. The proposed expansion of the existing Bridge received a Presidential Permit in 2022. The International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) has jurisdiction over the Rio Grande floodway; therefore, an IBWC License will be obtained.

More than one acre of land will be disturbed during construction of the proposed project; therefore, water quality impacts will be minimized with the use of erosion controls such as silt fences and rock berms. As such, a Notice of Intent (NOI) will be filed and a Storm Water Pollution Prevention Plan (SW3P) will be implemented as part of TCEQ requirements.

As noted above, this EA examined the direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts of the project and identified potential impacts, indirect and cumulative project effects on land use due to the current forecasted pace of development in the area. The EA concluded:

1. The Build Alternative is the recommended Preferred Alternative for the Pharr-Reynosa International Bridge Expansion project.
2. The Build Alternative meets the need and purpose of the project with the least amount of impacts to the resource areas.
3. The proposed project will have no significant impacts on the quality of the human or natural environment.
4. The City of Pharr, in cooperation with TxDOT, recommend a FONSI for the Pharr-Reynosa International Bridge Expansion project.

The recommendation for the selection of the Build Alternative resulted from a process that involved the public and close coordination with various federal, state, and local government agencies.

4.0 PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public involvement is an integral and critical component of the NEPA project development process. The public involvement team for this Pharr-Reynosa International Bridge Expansion Project included representatives from the TxDOT Pharr District, Environmental Affairs Division, FHWA, and Raba Kistner, Inc. The process included consultation with and the participation and involvement of FHWA, and its cooperating agencies.

4.1 Public Meeting

A public meeting was held for this project on May 3, 2022. The public meeting was held in-person with a virtual option to allow the public the opportunity to view the proposed project alignment, discuss with City and Consultant personnel, and provide comments. The public meeting notices and materials were published in English and Spanish. Spanish translators were available at the public meeting.

4.2 Public Hearing

A Notice Affording an Opportunity for Public Hearing for the Pharr-Reynosa International Bridge Expansion Project was published in The Monitor and El Periódico USA on July 26, 2023. Any interested person had until August 25, 2023 at 5:00 pm to request a Public Hearing. No requests for a public hearing were received. On August 31, 2023, TxDOT signed a Certification of Opportunity for a Public Hearing.

5.0 MITIGATION/COMMITMENTS

The majority of the potential impacts associated with the construction of the Build Alternative were avoided or minimized as documented in the EA. The design and construction of the Pharr-Reynosa International Bridge Expansion Project will incorporate measures to minimize harm to the environment, as described below.

Water Resources: The proposed project would require compliance with Section 404 of the Clean Water Act (CWA) and Sections 9 and 10 of the Rivers and Harbors Act (RHA). Based on anticipated impacts, the proposed project would be covered under a non-reporting Section 404/10 permit. Therefore, a Pre-Construction Notification (PCN) from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) would not be required. Coordination with the USCG for a Section 9 permit would be required. Since the project will disturb one or more acres of land, a Texas Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (TPDES) permit will be required, along with a NOI to the TCEQ. The plans and specifications will include a stormwater pollution prevention plan (SW3P). BMPs will be incorporated in the construction plans to minimize potential sedimentation effects in the storm water system. These measures will be in place before construction begins and would be inspected on a regular basis.

TCEQ 401 Certification: The project would require compliance with TCEQ's Water Quality Certification Program for Tier I projects (those that affect less than 1,500 linear feet of stream and/or 3 acres of waters of the U.S.). This would include incorporating water quality BMPs (erosion, sedimentation, and post-construction total suspended solids) in the project Environmental Permits, Issues and Commitments (EPIC) sheet.

Floodplains: The proposed project includes work within the 100-year floodplain; therefore, coordination with the local floodplain administrator is required.

Biological Resources: TPWD-recommended BMPs that will be applied to this project are indicated in the Form - *Documentation of Texas Parks and Wildlife Department BMPs*

prepared for the project, which is included in Appendix F of the EA. In addition, as summarized in Table 10, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) requested that bridge lighting be directed away from refuge areas, and should only aim or be shielded down toward the structure. The bridge lighting will be adjusted directly onto the bridge away from wildlife refuge areas, and should only aim or be shielded down toward the structure.

SW3P: The contractor would comply with TxDOT's BMPs outlined in the Storm Water Management Program.

Archeological Resources: In the event unanticipated archeological deposits during construction, cease work in the immediate area, and contact archeological staff to initiate post-review discovery procedures.

Vegetation: Documentation of TPWD BMP related to vegetation is included in Appendix F of the EA.

5.1 Monitoring or Enforcement

As to project mitigation, the City of Pharr is hereby required to ensure completion of all mitigation outlined above and set out specifically in the September 2023 Pharr-Reynosa International Bridge Expansion Project EA. TxDOT is also required to ensure that any and all local, state, or federal permit requirements and conditions are met and otherwise complied with.

All commitments and conditions of approval stated in the EA (Section 8.0, Post-Environmental Clearance Activities and Contractor Communications) will be monitored by TxDOT and other appropriate state, federal, and local agencies to ensure compliance.

6.0 CONCLUSION

The FHWA has reviewed all of the relevant documents and materials and all of the environmental studies and findings. Based upon our own independent review and analysis we find that the September 2023 Pharr-Reynosa International Bridge Expansion Project EA analyzed and considered all the relevant potential environmental impacts and issues. FHWA agrees with the City of Pharr and TxDOT recommendations made in the EA that:

1. The Build Alternative meets the need and purpose of the project with the least amount of impacts to the resource areas, and
2. The proposed project will have no significant impacts on the quality of the human or natural environment under NEPA.


Based upon our own agency review and consideration of the analysis and evaluation contained in the EA for this project, and after further careful consideration of all social, economic, and environmental factors, including input from the public involvement process, FHWA hereby issues this Finding of No Significant Impact for the Pharr-Reynosa International Bridge Expansion Project. The Build Alternative best fulfills the need and purpose for the

project and meet the goals identified for the Pharr-Reynosa International Bridge corridor. This proposed project is included in the 2020-2045 RGVMP MTP.

7.0 DETERMINATION

The FHWA has determined that the Build Alternative, which would construct a second twin bridge adjacent to and west of the existing Bridge, will have no significant impact on the human or natural environment. This Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) is based on the EA which has been independently evaluated by FHWA and determined to adequately and accurately discuss the need, potential environmental issues and impacts of the proposed project and appropriate mitigation measures. The EA provides sufficient evidence and analysis for determining that an environmental impact statement is not required.


For Federal Highway Administration


Date