

# IDOT Interstate 80 Environmental Justice Community Outreach Plan

*(This document is intended as a living document and will be continually updated and edited based on on-going input from the public and developments related to the current COVID-19 Pandemic)*

**Date:** March 9, 2022

## Introduction and Purpose

The Illinois Department of Transportation (Department) is studying a 16-mile section of I-80 from Ridge Road to US Route 30 that spans three counties (Kendall, Grundy, and Will) and six municipalities including the City of Joliet. The purpose of the I-80 Project is to provide a safe and efficient transportation system for both local and regional travel by improving access, reducing existing and future congestion, improving safety, and bringing I-80 up to current design standards. Improvements proposed include reconstructing the existing pavement, adding auxiliary lanes, widening shoulders, improving interchanges, and repairing, widening and replacing bridges along the corridor. General information about the project can be found on the project website at [www.i-80will.com/](http://www.i-80will.com/).

As part of the project, the Department proposes to replace the existing twin truss bridges on I-80 over the Des Plaines River located in the City of Joliet. These new, wider bridges would be located approximately 300 feet north of the existing bridges. The proposed bridge location would require the acquisition of property and impact existing residential communities within Joliet. In addition to the direct impacts to property owners where property would be acquired, as part of the Department's environmental analyses, additional direct and cumulative impacts to the community were identified. These impacts include temporary and permanent changes to the local street network, temporary construction impacts and detours, some permanent increases in noise levels particularly for residents that would be located closer to the new bridge structure, and temporary construction-related noise and vibration impacts. The project is also anticipated to change the visual character of the area, reducing the size of adjacent communities and altering the visual character due to the location of the new structure, property acquisition, and proposed implementation of new noise walls.

Federal agencies are required to identify and consider the potential for disproportionately high and adverse impacts on low-income and minority populations that could result from all programs, policies, and activities (Executive Order 12898). A disproportionate impact is one that would negatively affect low-income and minority populations (EJ populations) to a greater extent than non-EJ populations.

Based on information from the Department's Environmental Assessment (EA) completed in October 2019, the demographic makeup of communities in the area of the proposed Des Plaines River Bridge replacement contains a concentration of minority and low-income populations.

As part of the Department's EA process, public engagement efforts were conducted for people that lived within the 16-mile project area and included community engagement within EJ communities near the proposed bridge replacement area. Three public meetings were held throughout the study process to gather feedback on the I-80 project. In addition, the Department mailed surveys to owners and occupants of residences that would be displaced by the proposed bridge replacement. Surveys were

also mailed to residents within three to four blocks of the proposed bridge replacement. Residents and stakeholders in the affected community surrounding the bridge replacement area were invited to provide input on the project's effects at two community outreach meetings held in June and September 2019. A focused neighborhood community meeting was also held in July 2019. Additional opportunities to provide input were provided at a public hearing held for the EA in November 2019 and during the designated public comment period for the EA.

In accordance with Executive Order 12898, the Department is conducting additional focused EJ community outreach efforts to examine the impacts of the proposed Des Plaines River bridge replacement to the surrounding community. Input is being sought from communities that could be directly or indirectly impacted from the Des Plaines River bridge replacement and environmental justice residents who may experience a disproportionately high and adverse effect as a result of this improvement. Focused EJ outreach efforts were initiated by the Department in April 2020.

The purpose of the additional outreach efforts described in this document is to provide opportunities for full and fair participation by potentially affected environmental justice communities in the:

- Further examination and identification of the scope and extent of community impacts,
- Identification of potential solutions to address adverse community impacts identified, and
- Development of minimization and/or mitigation measures to address adverse impacts.

Findings from this outreach will be documented and inform transportation decision-making for this project. The purpose of the subsequent sections of this memo is to outline the proposed Community Outreach Plan for the I-80 Environmental Justice effort. The scope of this effort is described here to demonstrate the Department's commitment to seeking out and facilitating meaningful involvement by the impacted community. As these outreach efforts are conducted, the level of responsiveness and engagement by the community will be monitored, measured and documented to assess the effectiveness of outreach efforts. The timeline for outreach efforts and the strategies proposed in this document will continue to be evaluated and evolve based on responsiveness and ability to engage the impacted community in the transportation decision-making process.

### *Outreach Strategy in Response to COVID-19*

The Department retained CDM Smith to conduct these community engagement activities. Typically, this engagement would occur through door-to-door interactions with the impacted community, conducting open office hours and hosting a series of public informational meetings. However, due to the ongoing coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, in-person engagement activities must be postponed or limited for an indeterminate duration. The transportation improvements proposed for this project are necessary improvements for the I-80 corridor. This outreach plan has therefore been developed to advance outreach efforts within the constraints of state-mandated social distancing.

Recognizing possible hardships due to the mandated social distancing, overall response to the community outreach plan may vary. Residents may be less likely to engage as they face more challenging life altering situations, while on the other hand, due to the restrictions and many residents being homebound, engagement efforts may be more productive. Residents may take the time to review and respond, as well as welcome the communication with the outreach team, allowing them to have a voice.

The project team recognizes that all affected residents shall be considered in the decision-making process and understands it must seek and facilitate involvement from the potentially affected. As such, the proposed timeline for outreach may continue to evolve and be adjusted to obtain community input and participation.

## Community Outreach Strategy Overview

The community outreach strategy contains several methods proposed to obtain early input from leaders within the community, conduct direct outreach to displaced residents and members of the community that may be impacted by improvements proposed, to make the surrounding community aware of the proposed project, and to actively engage community input and participation in the identification of impacts, development of potential solutions to address adverse impacts, and to vet mitigation measures proposed. All key materials identified are proposed to be translated in both English and Spanish.

### *Early Community Partner Engagement Efforts*

#### *Advanced Outreach to Elected Officials and Key Community Leaders*

To initiate the community outreach efforts, provide elected officials with advanced notice, and best understand conditions on the ground and within the impacted community, the following will occur:

- (1) **Advanced Elected Officials Notice/Letter:** A letter will be sent to key elected officials to provide them with an early notification that this outreach is planned in their community. The purpose of this letter is to provide early notification to elected officials that continued community outreach will be occurring in the community and will describe the purposed of the outreach. The letter will direct them to the project web site for additional information and encourage them to call a project team representative if they have additional questions.
- (2) **Phone Calls to Key Community Leaders:** Following these elected official letters and early outreach, the project team would conduct interviews with approximately 15-20 key community leaders individually by phone or video chat to provide early vetting of the outreach plan proposed and to obtain any additional input on materials or planned outreach. This list of key community leaders includes key elected officials and community leaders actively involved in the community.

This early engagement will allow the project team to review the proposed outreach strategy, present and discuss initial outreach materials, and obtain additional input on the approach methods and materials proposed to engage the community and confirm stakeholders and other key voices within the community that will facilitate broad as well as tailored engagement efforts that may be needed. This step is important both to understand lessons learned from past outreach on this project as well as how the community is coping with COVID-19 and what outreach efforts may be appropriate in this context.

#### *Community Partner Organizations*

Once the materials and approach are refined with this early community leader input, the project team will engage and leverage input from a larger community partner stakeholder list comprised of community leaders, political representatives, non-profit organizations, local religious leaders, potential social media community sites, health department staff, social services, area Hispanic liaison (if applicable), senior and disability offices, and key personnel from the City of Joliet. This list of broader

stakeholder organizations and contacts will continue to be expanded based on input received from community partners. Communication to these community partners will occur concurrently with the affected community member mailing that is described in the next section. Phone calls will be made to this larger community partner list to invite them to become part of community partner meetings. Calls will be made in concert with the affected community mailing, but may occur slightly ahead of mailings, as deemed necessary.

These community partners will be provided information on these calls explaining the project and community partner meetings being undertaken. This communication will invite them to participate in virtual community partner meetings at three key steps in the outreach process: (1) identification of impacts and sharing input received through community questionnaires, (2) development of potential strategies, 3) vet preliminary recommendations on minimization and mitigation measures to be employed and obtain additional input on recommended mitigation measures, and to (4) review final recommendations for mitigation measures for the project. Four community partner meetings are proposed to engage the community during this process. The project team will track responses from this stakeholder group on their willingness and desire to participate in community partner meetings. Spreadsheet tracking will be used to document these communications and internal call logs may be used, as needed, to capture any additional input they provide during those calls. As needed, additional phone calls may be made for non-responsive community partners. The format and number of virtual meetings will be determined based on responsiveness and to best facilitate the ability of the project team to obtain meaningful input from community partners.

### *Community Mailing – Newsletter and Questionnaire*

A newsletter and community impact questionnaire will be sent out to (1) potentially displaced residents and (2) the potentially affected community that could be potentially impacted. The newsletter mailing will provide basic information on the proposed project, the outreach effort being undertaken, and provide email, telephone, and address contact information for one-on-one interaction with team members. It will also include renderings of the proposed project.

In addition to this information, the newsletter will also note several ways for the community to become involved.

- *Filling Out a Community Questionnaire:* Hard copy of the Questionnaire as well as a link to an online site to fill out the community questionnaire will be provided. A completed community questionnaire may be submitted online or returned to the CDM Smith Chicago Office team in the self-addressed stamped envelope provided.
- *Individualized Opportunities to Provide Feedback or Ask Questions:* A dedicated outreach phone number and email address will be listed in the letter, with a commitment to respond within 24-hours to incoming emails and voicemails. Both the outreach email and phone number will have 24-hour access, allowing for full participation based on community member's schedule and availability. Input received will be documented in call logs or other formats to capture and document every comment received.

- *Soliciting Continued Participation:* Community Questionnaires will capture contact information and include a question on their willingness and desire to continue to stay informed as overall community engagement activities occur and to participate in the decision-making process.

The newsletter and the community questionnaire will be translated in English and Spanish and information on the mailed English version will provide community members with an ability to be sent Spanish translated materials. Community questionnaire questions will be the same for both the potentially displaced and affected residents. One-on-one outreach efforts will provide additional assistance to answer potentially displaced residents' questions on specific relocation and acquisition needs. The newsletter and questionnaire will be sent via regular U.S. Postal Service mail. The mailing will include a postage paid, return addressed envelope for community members that wish to mail back a completed community impact questionnaire.

Responses to the community questionnaire will be documented and responsiveness will be tracked through a continually updated property owner database (discussed later below).

Additional one-on-one interviews will help to identify specific property owner and tenant needs and further identify any assistance for displaced residents as well. While the overall purpose of one-on-one outreach is to provide greater assistance to understand and document overall community impacts, one-on-one outreach to displaced property owners and tenants may also provide the Department with more detailed information on relocation needs. This additional information can also serve to provide valuable information to property owners and tenants that may allow the Department to (1) further answer property owner and tenant questions about the benefits that displaced residents or tenants are eligible for, (2) provide additional advisory services to potentially displaced property owners and tenants, and (3) make sure that displaced property owners or tenants do not proceed with any activities that may adversely impact their ability to receive acquisition and relocation assistance.

Several outreach methods will be available to solicit feedback from members of the community, including:

#### *Monitoring Contacts through the Internal Property Tracking Database*

Contacts will be tracked with an internal database to measure the effectiveness of this initial outreach activity. This database is an important tool to track and document each time a resident has been contacted and/or if outreach attempts have been made by the project team, if a resident has attended a prior meeting, called the project telephone number or made any prior contacts to the project team. This database will also track online comments, detail if residents signed-in at prior meetings and hearings, etc. The database will list every comment and concern that the respective resident has expressed.

### *Additional Communications to Share Project Information*

Several tools will be used to provide additional methods for making the community aware of the project and outreach process and to facilitate participation and meaningful involvement in decision-making. These methods will continue to be monitored and updated based on input received from the community.

- **ONE ON ONE OUTREACH AND OFFICE HOURS** – The dedicated community outreach specialist will serve as a single point of contact for the community to answer questions and assist the community throughout the outreach efforts. As appropriate and as part of key decision points during the process, the outreach specialist will conduct one-one meetings (virtually or in person, as safety guidance allows) and provide office hours at a community location convenient and within the community outreach area to facilitate additional input and aid in receiving input from the community.
- **COMMUNITY FOOD DRIVES** – The dedicated community outreach specialist will utilize community food drives to build relationships in the community, provide copies and assistance with the questionnaire and to answer any questions.
- **POSTCARDS** – Postcards may be hand delivered and/or mailed at specific points in the engagement to further spread updates and to encourage feedback.
- **PROJECT WEBSITE** – The project team will update the current project website ([www.I-80will.com](http://www.I-80will.com)) with Environmental Justice (EJ) requirements and to describe the EJ public engagement process and progress. Materials to be included: a project overview, the outreach process and status, a link to the online questionnaire, current contact information for contacting the project team, and an aerial map specifically detailing the potentially impacted community. This map will delineate potential land acquisition, potential displacements and non-acquisition parcels that may be indirectly impacted adjacent to proposed acquisitions and project improvements. Additionally, the project team will list all the additional community groups that the project team is attempting to engage as part of community partnership outreach efforts. Efforts will be made to utilize visualizations as well as clear concise, and non-technical language to describe the project. Project documents on the website will be made available in English and Spanish.
- **NEWSPAPER/TRADITIONAL MEDIA** – Draft newspaper ad and/or press releases for local newspaper publication, inviting the community to get involved and open dialogue. The project team will consider utilizing local, minority owned and operated and free community newspapers and media in the Joliet area. The ad will include communication methods the community can use to obtain information pertaining to the project and how they can become involved. A link for the online survey will also be provided.
- **SOCIAL MEDIA AND OTHER ONLINE ENGAGEMENT** – Several community groups identified as potential community partners have relatively large Facebook or Twitter subscribers. The project team will reach out directly with these entities to share project materials and encourage them to post information on the project on their websites to solicit additional feedback and participation and to keep the community up to date on project developments and communications. Additionally,

with many congregations moving to online formats, there may be opportunities to engage the community in partnership with religious organizations through their own formats. The project team will reach out to religious organization contacts as well to ascertain any additional social media formats where project information could be shared.

- **EMAIL/E-BLASTS** – Project e-blasts will be sent to the existing “mailing” list at key points in engagement, encouraging additional feedback and indicating the need for meaningful public engagement and input as decision-making progresses. At minimum, three e-blasts would be developed to summarize input received following each community partner meeting proposed and to update the community on the status of outreach efforts, impacts identified through community input received, and in vetting and recommending potential mitigation measures.
- **POSTERS** – Posters will be developed in both English and Spanish, with large fonts. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many local organizations and businesses are temporarily closed. The project team will work to research and identify businesses, agencies, groups represented by stakeholders and local organizations that are operational and/or willing to display project related posters. Posters will be on display at local businesses, churches, and community centers. If an identified posting location is not open but is still providing communications to the community through online website formats, such as a library or church, electronic versions of the posters will be disseminated to community partner organizations so that they can publish posters on their websites. The intent of the poster is to provide information regarding the project, the outreach initiatives, and further publicize opportunities for the community to provide input into identification of impacts and proposed mitigation strategies.

## Using Community Input, Holding Community Partner Meetings and Vetting Impacts and Mitigation Strategies

Community partners will be identified through the outreach efforts noted above and may be enhanced through input received during outreach efforts. Community partners may include EJ and other community leaders, political representatives, non-profit organizations, local religious leaders, potential social media community sites, health department staff, social services, area Hispanic liaison (if applicable), senior and disability offices, and key personnel from the City of Joliet, as well as those in the community that are interested in participating.

Virtual community partner meetings are proposed at key points in the decision-making process to obtain community-wide input: (1) to review the proposed project improvements, planning process to date, including alternatives developed and evaluated at earlier stages of project development to arrive at the proposed project, and to receive input on the scope and extent of impacts to the surrounding community (2) to review results from the community impact questionnaire and in developing a comprehensive list of needs and potential strategies for addressing adverse impacts identified, (3) to vet preliminary recommendations on minimization and mitigation measures to be employed and obtain additional input on recommended mitigation measures, and to (4) review final recommendations for mitigation measures for the project. This community partnering process will be iterative and collaborative to build community trust and obtain meaningful input from the community. This process will inform the transportation decision-making process and next steps for this project. Summary

meeting notes and presentation materials will be made available on the project website following each meeting and e-blasts, advertisements, social media, and other formats will be used to further disseminate materials and summary information to the community, offering continued ways for members of the community to provide additional input through the decision-making process.

The completed community questionnaires, community partner virtual meetings, and one-on-one interactions with impacted community members are specifically targeted to gather meaningful input from the community on the scope and extent of community impacts and appropriate mitigation relative to these impacts. Through these outreach efforts, the project team will also attempt to identify and include in this documentation any comments from residents on any other past impacts to their community from government (city, county, state, federal) projects; including, but not limited to the original construction of I-80, recent water treatment plant expansion, former street projects, former drainage improvements.

Understanding and documenting the extent and scope of impacts and concerns in the community will be the first focus in outreach efforts. As letters and questionnaires are disseminated within the community to obtain early input on project impacts and concerns, Community Partner Meeting #1 will provide an overview of the project, alternatives considered through the planning process, and an opportunity to understand impacts from community representatives and organizations. As questionnaires are completed and can be summarized, additional one-on-one outreach occurs, and community partner input is taken, the project team will compile and summarize all input received regarding community concerns. These compiled areas of concerns about impacts will be shared as part of Community Partner Meeting #2 and will help to inform an early discussion of potential mitigation measures to be considered.

Based on input from Community Partner Meeting #2 and additional, ongoing one-on-one outreach with impacted community members, the project team will identify a series of potential mitigation measures for further discussion and consideration with the Department and FHWA. Based on those discussions, preliminary recommendations on mitigation strategies will be presented at Community Partner Meeting #3 and provided to any applicable agencies for review and consideration as well.

Once input has been received from community partners and applicable agencies and concurrence on recommended mitigation strategies has been reached with the Department, the FHWA, community partners and the community members, the project team will document both the findings on the scope and extent of impacts as well as recommended mitigation measures in a Community Impact Assessment. Once finalized, a Community Partner Meeting #4 will be held to share final mitigation measure recommendations. Copies of the final Community Impact Assessment will be made available to the public on the website, and information on the Community Impact Assessment and recommended mitigation measures contained within it will be disseminated to the impacted community and community partners in a public-friendly format. The format for this final communication will be determined based on the outreach efforts at that time. In some cases, one-on-one relationships in the community may warrant phone calls, while in other cases email or mailed communications may be determined as more appropriate in properly informing residents and community partners. A 30-day comment period for obtaining input from the community will be established once the community has been notified that the Draft Community Impact Assessment is published on the project website. Comments received during this time will be documented and a response to comments document will be

developed and published to the project website. Input received during this comment period will inform any final changes to the Community Impact Assessment and recommended mitigation measures. A Final Community Impact Assessment will be published to the project website following this comment period and review by FHWA and the Department.

## Continued Monitoring of the Community Outreach Plan

The key to this initial phase of outreach is to provide the necessary platform for the residents to feel empowered, have their voices heard and understand that their opinions and input matter, while also being sensitive to the current COVID-19 climate.

This Community Outreach Strategy may be adjusted through engagement so that outreach efforts provide meaningful input into the decision-making process and so that the mitigation strategies developed are robust and address community concerns relative to the impacts from this transportation project. The project team will work with the Department to obtain concurrence from FHWA regarding whether the community engagement plan is meeting the Environmental Justice outreach needs of the project, and will continue to coordinate with the District, BDE and FHWA over the course of the outreach to monitor progress and make any needed adjustments or updates to the community outreach strategy or timeline.

As an example of modifications that may be considered to enhance outreach, the project team may conduct a round of hand delivered postcards door to door (if permitted, due to COVID-19 pandemic) to the community, while maintaining social distancing, attempting to engage on a more personal level and to encourage communication. The project team may consider creating social media pages i.e. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. These platforms could allow the team additional opportunities to engage with the community depending on the performance of other outreach efforts detailed in this community outreach plan. As engagement efforts are initiated, the project team may also be able to obtain other input and advice on strategies or mechanisms to reach out to members of the community that may currently be experiencing unpredictable internet service or a lack of availability or access to computers and prepaid services. The project team is aware of several community groups with active social media pages and may choose to interact and share information (including live Q&A sessions) via those existing platforms rather than creating new social media pages specific to the outreach effort. The final social media strategy will be refined through early stakeholder conversations to determine the best approach to online engagement for this community.