

Saskatoon Freeway Functional Planning Study - Phase 2

Environmental Organization Focus Group Summary

2:00 – 4:00pm July 21st, 2020

Opening Remarks:

1. **Purpose:** The purpose of this focus group is to ensure that public perspective is being considered early on in Phase 2.

2. Introduction of project team:

Team Member	Company	Project Role
Geoff Meinert	Ministry of Highways and Infrastructure	Senior Project Manager
Jamie Page	SNC Lavalin	Environment Lead
David Stearns	SNC Lavalin	Project Director
Allan Duff	AECom	Deputy Project Manager
Tim Sorochinsky	AECom	Highway Geometrics Lead
Craig Rudulier	SNC	Project Administrator
Kathryn Pollack	Praxis Consulting	Engagement Lead
Shawn Silzer	Praxis Consulting	Engagement Advisor
Kauron Cooper	Praxis Consulting	Project Manager

3. **Accommodation Update:** The focus groups were capped at 15 individuals per session. We are pleased to note that everyone who inquired asking to attend the focus groups was provided a spot within one of the three sessions offered.

4. Zoom ground rules:

- Participants were reminded to be respectful and actively listen to one another and encouraged to participate in the open dialogue.
- A brief overview of the agenda was given, and participants were informed if they had questions regarding either of the presentations, they were to either press the 'raise hand' function or type their question into the chat. After the presentation was concluded the questions would be addressed according to a first come, first serve basis.

5. Boundaries of discussion:

- Participants were reminded about the topics that were open for discussion and the ones that were not. The topics that were open for discussion included:
 - o What is the best location for the Saskatoon Freeway within the 500 m corridor?
 - o What are the best ways to implement the road and bridges in a way that minimizes environmental impacts?

- Are there any potential mitigations that need to be considered?

Presentation #1 – Saskatoon Freeway Overview – Geoff Meinert

This presentation focused on the layout of the proposed Saskatoon Freeway. Key aspects to note include:

- The highway is expected to be 55 km long
- There will be an anticipated 16 interchanges, 5 railway crossings, +4 flyovers, and 1 bridge crossing.
- The corridor currently being held is 500 m, but the project footprint itself is anticipated to be approximately 100 m; that is the focus of this functional planning study.
- A needs-based case for the Saskatoon Freeway previously completed focused on projected population growth, congestion, and reduced road user costs.

As well, the presentation included some discussion regarding the Swales since Phase 2 is predominately focused on the area of the freeway that crosses the Swales. The presentation included why the planned route was crossing the Swales, the potential routes within the corridor being considered, and the potential mitigation measures being considered to reduce environmental disruption resulting from the crossing the Swales.

Questions:

Focus Group Session 3 – Environmental Organizations (July 21, 2020)

Q: There is a problem in the details. There are three very different areas. My concern with the NE Swale crossing is the large number of ducks and the people who want to view these ducks. Is it a bridge crossing? Although I am happy that you are thinking of crossing between the water masses, there are bird and flower concerns just to the north of your proposed crossing. There is sharp tailed grouse there.

A: We have not determined that yet, but it is an option.

Q: Is there a mechanism for using pavement that reduces noise in those environmental areas? Do you have an option that is more effective than sound walls? You should likely use the most effective sound options for the NE Swale and the small Swale

A: Yes, rubber asphalt concrete surfaces reduce noise. Most likely this is the option we'll consider for the freeway. And no, I would say that the sound walls would have higher sound pressure dissipation. A very busy freeway is known to be 90 decibels.

Q: Is it effective to have a bridge crossing over the small Swale?

A: We believe so, that is why it is in the considerations.

Q: The Green Ash Forest – at the lower riverbank near the Swale – is a rather unique type of forest and the bridge is going to cross this. Would a large span on the bridge be constructed so that the trees do not have to be ripped up during the construction process?

A: Yes, we are looking at two types of bridges: steel girder bridge, or the cable-stayed bridge. The cable-stayed bridge causes significantly less disruption to the riverbank.

Q: It is hard to comment on mitigation options when we do not have access to a lot of data. We need to either see the MVA research data. We also need ongoing surveys in the Swales.

A: This all should be posted by end of July for public review. As well, surveys within the Small and NE Swale are ongoing during 2020.

Q: Appreciates the walls to keep wildlife off the highway. But we do not want to isolate or trap wildlife. Have you identified specific corridors?

A: We did snow tracking surveys late winter/early spring to see what types of animals are moving and where. Certain types of animals prefer certain types of crossing. Therefore, the crossings will be determined based on the animals we find.

Presentation #2 – Environmental Research Overview – Jamie Page

This presentation highlighted the completed field and desktop research being done as part of the environment and heritage review. This included the Phase 1 environmental report, MVA research focusing specifically on the Swales, as well as additional ongoing studies. As well, the presentation provided a list of the wildlife and plants that have been already been identified within the roadway's corridor. Potential future surveys are recommended to be conducted closer to construction, potentially as part of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). The presentation also detailed general mitigation measures that have been developed to date for wildlife, wetlands, native grasslands, contaminated sites, South Saskatchewan River crossing and the Wanuskewin Heritage Park. The main mitigation measures identified as being needed included the integration of different wildlife crossings and wetland crossings. Lastly, the presentation touched on the potential future requirement of a provincial or federal EIA.

Questions:

Focus Group Session 3 – Environmental Organizations (July 21, 2020)

Q: In the case of the wetlands, restoration or compensation would need to be done. Can you elaborate? What is the compensation?

A: This would be determined by the recommendations in the EIA. Typically, monetary compensation would be required for any impact to wetlands. This money would be used to create wetland elsewhere. We have talked about fixing the areas of the Small Swale that was previously affected. We would do the same with the grasslands, although grassland would likely have to be mitigated somewhere else. The first choice is to compensate in the same watershed to maintain existing/ ample drainage, but it is not always a possibility

Q: With consideration to compensation, we should try to reduce any direct environmental effects on the Small Swale, NE Swale and Green Ash forest. I am curious about the two areas of grassland just outside the corridor of the Small Swale. This is an area of grassland that should be included in the protection/mitigation.

A: MVA is providing us with their data. We are combining it with our data to ensure that it is being taken into consideration. Vegetation surveys in the swale are also underway in 2020.

Q: I just want to clarify the process. The route of the freeway is set, but the EIA is done after everything is set? Seems a little bit backwards. Shouldn't we be planning now to go around these species?

A: This functional planning study is about avoidance and designing mitigations wherever we can. We are trying to condense the current 500 m corridor down to 100 m to avoid some of those more prominent areas. As we get narrowed down on our options, we do more and more assessments. You cannot do an EIA on a concept. We have to have a project and then we narrow down those details to identify those environmentally sensitive areas and mitigate them.

Q: I want to reiterate the point about the EIA. Will this assessment have the authority to make changes if the impacts are too much to be mitigated? To what extent does this assessment have an impact? The route was assessed without any public input in the decision making. Greatly concerned about the fact that the route has already been decided. Just upset that there is no way to avoid and make no impact of the Swale.

A: That is why we are doing this work 10-15 years prior to building the freeway. We want to get ahead of this. Once we get too far down the process, costs are higher and things will already be set. The process is that as we narrow down our options, we gather more data. We do not do the EIA until we get close to being set on a precise location. What we have found so far is that there are not any big enough barriers to halt construction of the freeway along the proposed route. We have identified sensitive areas, but we can accommodate them, even if these areas of the freeway will be more expensive.

Q: I understand that you do not want to do it on a concept, but will the EIA have the authority to say "Whoa. The effect of putting a road and a bridge is too much"? This is remnant prairie. I understand, a route has been decided without any public input other than cursory, and I know that is not on the table, but it has to be said. This is not an ecological decision. I am gravely concerned the route has been decided.

A: We do have the ability to move the freeway to avoid sensitive areas, but not on a large-scale. We have to tie it into the bridge crossing location that has already been determined.

Q: I want to answer a previous participant's question. There is 8-9% of native prairie left in Saskatchewan. The MVA did data collection last year. This was just what was collected during the 2019 summer and winter year with the snow animal tracking? Why are we not looking at 2018 and 2017 data? Is this being considered? Are you using information through E-Bird as well?

A: If the information on animals has been uploaded to HabiSask, then it will be considered and included in the report. We have most of MVA's recent data files which includes previously identified plants and animals. We are sharing our files with them, and they are sharing their files with us. Yes, we are also using e-bird.

Q: If a species at risk is found with a close alignment, what are your mitigation measures?

A: We are trying to avoid any rare and endangered species. It would often depend if they were identified during preconstruction surveys. It really depends on what level of rare species it is, and whether or not

we are able to mitigate it. We have not got into the full Phase 2 mitigations yet so there still remains the potential to put restoration or relocation plans in place.

Q: I asked this question of you over a year ago, but what sort of expertise does the Ministry of Highways and Infrastructure have with wildlife crossings and mitigating these wildlife endeavors?

A: We have little to no experience in this area, but we have the ability to hire expertise.

Q: There is information on how to cross grassland areas in Montana and Arizona, but there is not anything entirely specific to us in Saskatchewan. That is a problem, but an opportunity as well. The City of Edmonton has done good work with their mitigation planning. They are a good reference to look to. I get concerned with projects like these because it is almost near impossible to mitigate and restore wetlands and areas like these.

A: There will be a monitoring program 3-5 years post-construction. If mitigations are unsuccessful, we will need to find a new way to meet those conditions in the EIA. We want to look at past experiences, what has worked, what has not worked. And looking at those places that share similar animals to what we have and what they have done. We are continuously looking at academic studies as to what has been done so that we are as informed as possible. We will look into the resources you mentioned for more information.

Q: One area that was not mentioned today was light pollution. Can we keep lighting to a minimum?

A: The Ministry of Highways and Infrastructure does not use continuous lighting, only at decision making points. So yes, lighting is kept to a minimum.

Q: When you mentioned the cable stay bridge option earlier, I was supportive, but have you checked into any possible impacts with bird collisions with those cables? What effect would this have on the Green Ash forest?

A: That is a good point, we can do some research into bird impacts. Currently, we are not aware of bird collisions as the cables are thick and do not move. One issue we have heard of ice build-up on the cables. As for the Green Ash forest, we would try to avoid constructing the bridge pier in the forest.

Q: I like the idea of the cable stay bridge option, but you may want to run this by the Saskatoon Airport Authority for clearance on height and impact on planes.

A: Yes, 100% we have talked to the airport authority. This bridge is not in the way of flight paths, but Highway 16 is right in the way of a flight path. Therefore, we will work with them more closely on this.