

Saskatoon Freeway Functional Planning Study - Phase 2

Public Focus Group 2 Summary

6:00 – 8:00pm 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:

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Q: The highway is going to be 1 km away from the existing commuter parkway. I feel we need to learn a lesson from Circle Drive. This is going to be within city limits in no time at all and it will be congested like Circle Drive. Why are we not investing a little extra money and moving this further north to make it a true perimeter highway?

A: Circle Drive and the Saskatoon Freeway will be fundamentally different. There will be no access other than interchanges on the Saskatoon Freeway. Circle Drive has a lot of different accesses which slow traffic down. The intent is that this is a highspeed corridor that can function at a high capacity even with the City on both sides.

Q: Why is the south and west option in your own transport report not being considered? I see no reason for why it is where it is. Who is driving this?

A: The Ministry of Highways and Infrastructure is driving this, but we will not be getting into details on this business case in this session today.. The east side is a huge residential area, with a lot of commuter traffic from there to the north (where most of the business area is). Therefore, this route will have more traffic and its use will be fundamentally higher than a freeway in the southwest.

Q: How can the location of Costco affect your decision but no one else seems to?

A: The Ministry of Highways and Infrastructure, along with the City, made an agreement and so that is why we accommodated the location of Costco and area with this route.

Q: I appreciate the repeated reference to Banff as a model, but bypasses for grassland will have to be different and let in light. Also, a small trail can fragment grassland and alter creature migration. I could see how Banff-style wildlife crossings this would allow deer, foxes, etc, but what kind of mitigation can you suggest for short eared owls? I am not sure if you have picked these up, but I have seen them there with my own eyes in the Swales

A: Yes, great question, this will be answered in the next presentation, but to be clear the detailed animal mitigations/wildlife crossings are still in consideration/development for Phase 2.

Q: Do we have data on the number of trucks that will be using the freeway? The models for the commuter parkway were pretty far off, I understand. And do truckers really want to go around Saskatoon? If they are coming from Winnipeg, for example, wouldn't they have to stop in Saskatoon?

A: We have a ball-park estimate with truck traffic projections. What we see with commuter traffic is around that 6%-10% is trucks (of every 100,000 vehicles). Typically, this would be 20% but with the high level of commuter traffic we expect, it will be a little lower.

Q: Regarding Banff and the over/underpasses, those are great ideas, but what is the likelihood of putting out the extra money to accommodate animals? On Central Avenue there is no accommodation for deer. Another concern is noise. You can hear so much more across the prairie because it is wide open. How do you plan to mitigate this? And will you, because this will be expensive?

A: We are fundamentally different from McOrmond Drive and Central Avenue due to the high mobility design associated with the freeway. Animals do not mix with these high speeds. We have the ability and benefit of time to plan, forecast, and set money aside for those premium expenses. These higher costs would only be 5 km of the 55 km (through the Swales) where the high needs are required. This is a small percentage that we will budget for.

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:

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Q: Are all of the studies going to be done only within the 500 m corridor of the roadway? Or are you going to consider animal movement in other directions? The fence may crowd animals onto the commuter parkway. MVA only has authority to do studies within their boundaries on how animals move. Does that mean the rest of the Swale is not going to be considered? Are you considering animal movement through all four seasons?

A: Vegetation surveys used a 300m buffer on either side of the 500m corridor, for a total of a 1.1km wide study area. The wildlife studies used a 1000m buffer on either side, for a total study area that was 2.5km wide. MVAs surveys were completed within the NE and small swales. Snow tracking was completed in spring/late winter 2020 and identified movements through the NE and small swale within the 2.5 km study area- wildlife cameras have also been installed and will collect information 2019-2021. Outside of wildlife monitoring, most surveys are being completed in the spring/summer. EIA surveys, when completed, would be done according to species specific timing windows.

Q: Can I please note that the MVA did not get access to the Small Swale until August 2019? They have only had access in late summer and fall of last year.

A: There have been no constraints put on MVA access by the project team; we will follow-up with MVA to ensure they know they have access.

Q: Are you following the Ministry of Environment survey protocols?

A: Depends on the survey, we are doing rapid assessment surveys throughout the corridor in 85 quarter sections. We did not do the Swale until this year. In other areas, we have done meandering surveys and are uploading to the conservation data protocols. We are not doing detailed species-specific surveys in most areas, except for the Swales. The rest is rapid assessment surveys.

Q: You mentioned snow tracking surveys. The U of S and the MVA were doing a study but they were not able to raise funds. I strongly recommend the Ministry of Highways and Infrastructure fund this to get real information. Where is the biological survey data? And will it be made public?

A: That data is not in our jurisdiction, but we are working with the City of Saskatoon to make that information public and we will make ours public too. We have to abide by what they say, but we will ask them to make this public. All survey data collected as part of our studies will be uploaded into the Saskatchewan Conservation Data Centre and HABISask.

Q: You have showed us the mitigation pyramid as the base of your approach to minimizing Swales impact. We know the first step is to avoid, and if not possible, to mitigate and then to offset and compensate. You use the word mitigation several times. What would this compensation look like for wetlands and grasslands?

A: That would be dictated by the Ministry of Environment, as determined through an EIA. It would likely be a dollar amount/ hectare disrupted. This would be paid to the Ministry of Environment and sent to a restoration agency to ensure that new wetland/grassland areas are created to compensate for losses due to the project. We want to look at restoring the NE and Small Swales as part of a compensation strategy. We want to keep this restoration work within the same area, if possible.

Q: What makes this land so special is that it is inside the City. The meaning of these lands is that they are almost a human right for people living in the City. This land is heritage land for Indigenous peoples. You have to have that land if you are going to have reconciliation. The Ministry of Highways and Infrastructure has a standard compensation ratio for wetlands. I feel that a ratio should be established and built into the plan for grasslands as well.

A: That is a good comment. We will definitely note that a ratio for both wetlands and grasslands should be considered.

Q: Regarding timelines, the work done is an environmental desktop and base plan. A technical proposal has not been submitted yet to the Ministry of Environment, correct? So, since there are no formal permits submitted yet for the freeway, that means there is still opportunity for them to move it, correct? They are not fixed in terms of environmental or heritage concerns. When would you be looking at submitting a Technical Proposal?

A: Yes, that is correct. The Ministry of Environment recently joined our TWG so we have engaged with them on this. They can advise on mitigation measures they want to see, but they won't evaluate the project formally without a Technical Proposal (TP). The TP typically wouldn't be sent until we are 5 years out from construction. It is the direct precursor to the EIA, generally speaking.

Q: Is there a possibility an EIA will not be conducted? Who would be conducting the assessment? MVA would not be, would they?

A: Based on the TP eventually submitted to the Ministry of Environment, they will determine whether or not an EIA is required. It is highly likely that they will require one. As far as who will be assessing it, it is so far down the road that we have not yet considered consultants yet. MVA would not be considered a consultant. They are experts, but they do not have the full range of expertise required. They would have input but would not be involved in the writing process.

Q: Regarding the Swale Watchers leaving the committee, I just want to ensure that concerns from everyone will be heard.

A: The letter back to the Swale Watchers regarding their departure from the TWG has not yet been finalized or sent out. In our meetings with them, we mentioned some things that are off the table - this included moving the corridor for the freeway (the same condition we put into place for this focus group). After more than a year of ongoing dialogue, they have since chosen to leave our TWG. Unfortunately, until there is a formal response, there is not much that we can comment on.

Comment made via online chat: The Swale Watchers were sent an invitation to consult with Highways and Praxis only if we agreed not to raise objections to the route, etc.

A: No response was provided.

Q: When will MVA get access to the Small Swale this year? Last year they worked with us, the Saskatoon Nature Society, and we have not been contacted yet this year. We think this is partly because of COVID19, but partly because they have not been approved to have access to go onto the land, and in particular the Small Swale.

A: I was not aware that they do not have access. They should have already had access. Their work started in June. They are acting upon our behalf. We will reach out to them and let them know that they do have access.

Q: We know that native grasslands sequester huge amounts of carbon. Has there been consideration as to how the release of that carbon might be mitigated?

A: It is too early to begin looking at mitigating this because we do not have details regarding the design, but likely this would be considered under the EIA modeling.

Q: Is there any estimate of timing as to when impacted landowners are going to be contacted and advised how much of our land will be required.

A: You should have received a letter at the end of May. If you did not get one, please stay on at the end of this meeting so that we can get your contact information.

Q: I would like to talk about lighting design. If you are going to be using International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) guidelines on lighting protocols, dark sky lighting will not meet those standards. And if you are using high impact lighting, it will severely harm the area. This amount of lighting should be reduced. This is a sensitive area. You should be utilizing the IUCN and the Parks Canada Guideline for Outdoor Lighting. What standard are you going to compare dark standard lighting to? You should be looking at the Edmonton Airport for low light considerations.

A: We do not illuminate the whole highway, but you are right, the Ministry of Highways and Infrastructure does not have a policy on dark sky lighting. I will make sure that the engineers find these standards and evaluate them.

Q: I have a numbers question. What would be the per quarter section land take?

A: 100 m times 800 m would be your approximate area.

Q: In terms of the NE Swale and the compensation and build - how did you guys ballpark estimate the cost compared to going around the Swales?

A: We have a standard cost for bridge crossing and per km/lane costs and interchange costs. We will be developing a more detailed costing to come, but currently the one we have is very high level. These costs will be shown based on a % basis of the entire project cost. We will not be able to release the costs prior to tendering as it might cause influence during bidding time.

Q: Speaking of cost, the only estimate we've got for the whole project is 6 years old, at \$2 billion. Has there been an update?

A: That is one of the last things we will do with the project – that is when the Ministry of Highways and Infrastructure will do a more accurate cost estimate, once we have more concrete plans.