
1. Overview

This report is the first of several that will, over a twenty-two month period, examine alternatives for improving transportation in a corridor that is generally defined as being one-mile on either side of M-15 between I-75 and I-69 in Oakland and Genesee Counties, Michigan (Figure 1-1). The goal is to gain approval of the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) to advance the project from this environmental analysis phase to the design phase. Technical analyses will define and analyze the impacts of “build” alternatives versus not implementing any improvements in the corridor. Alternatives formulation and analysis will be guided by interaction with the public, other stakeholders, and agencies that have a regulatory role in project development (for example, those dealing with wetlands, endangered species, and cultural resources).

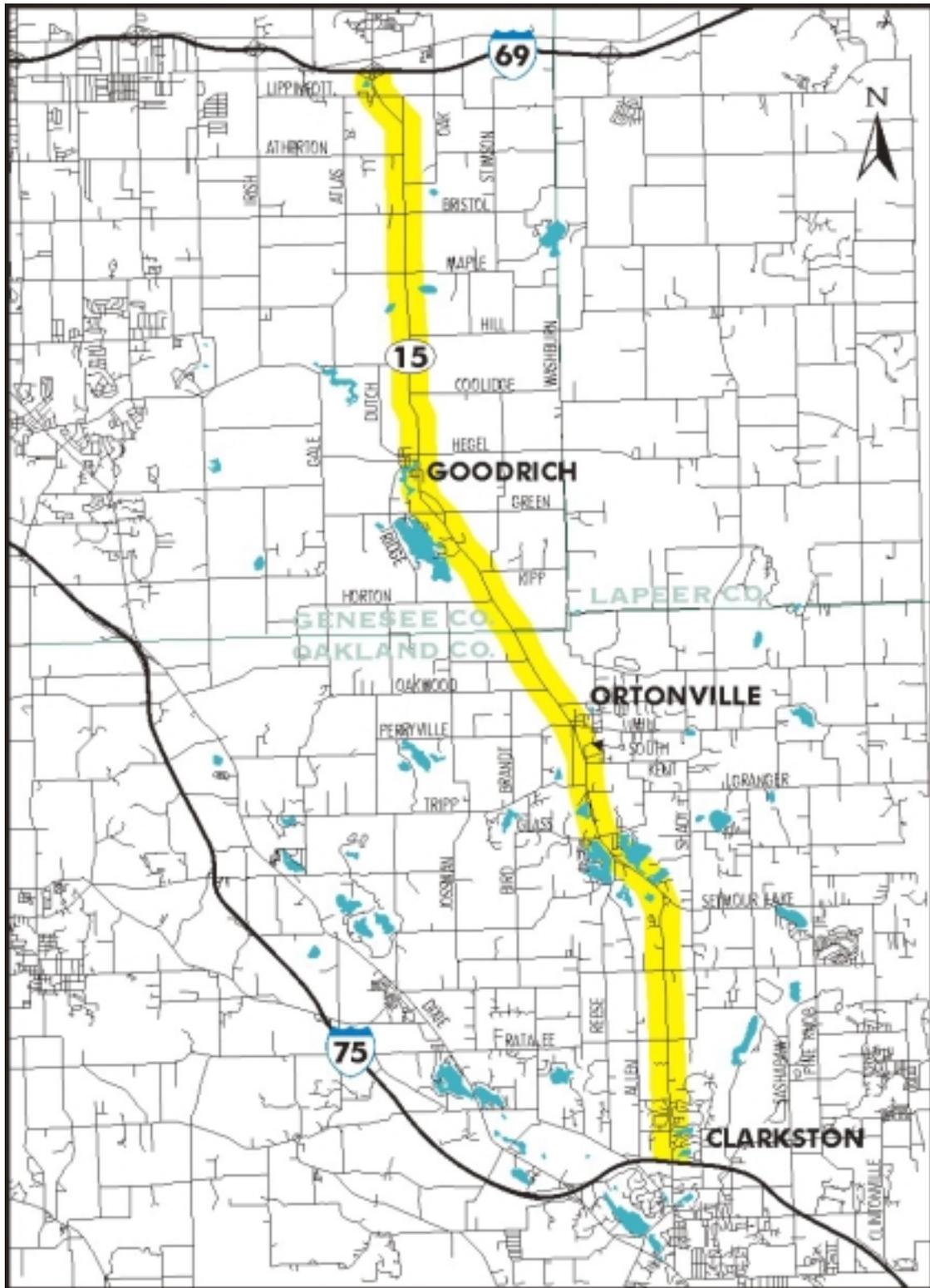
This chapter provides an overview of the project: its history, purpose, and schedule. It is followed by chapters that describe the study area, discuss the range of alternatives to be considered, and the process that will be used to perform the first evaluation of these options in moving toward the best course of action. Alternatives will be considered in the context of project need, impacts, and public and agency involvement.

1.1 History

M-15 is a north-south arterial extending 70 miles (110 kilometers) from U.S. 24 in Oakland County to M-25 in Bay County. The current analysis is confined to the 20-mile (32-kilometer) section between I-75 and I-69. South of I-75 is the Village of Clarkston in Oakland County. North of the junction with I-69 is the City of Davison in Genesee County. These two communities fall outside the study area. Ortonville in Oakland County and Goodrich in Genesee County are directly served by M-15. The core or “downtown” sections of these communities are, for the most part, “off line”, meaning that M-15 does not bisect these districts, but skirts them. The project is almost equally divided between the two counties.

The Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) developed a “Preliminary Project Statement” in 1995 that first addressed congestion in the corridor. That study found that in the previous decade, traffic volumes on M-15 in Oakland County had increased at up to seven percent per year. Population projections indicated that such growth would continue in the area placing continuing pressure on M-15. Safety analysis performed at that time concluded that the accident experience reflected a roadway with capacity and turning movement deficiencies. Traffic volume growth in the Genesee County portion of the corridor was found to be more moderate, but new housing projects were underway, with the expectation of more to come. The findings of the Preliminary Project Statement are summarized below.

Figure 1-1
Study Area



- Existing and forecast travel indicated a need for construction of a five-lane section in Oakland County, consistent with the results of the 1991 Northern Oakland County Corridor Study (by The Corradino Group). MDOT's Preliminary Project Statement suggested that a boulevard be considered as an alternative to the five-lane typical section.
- Money should be dedicated to two studies: (1) a feasibility study (to include an environmental study and a determination of general alignment, cross section, and right-of-way needs); and, (2) a corridor management study to work with local communities to preserve needed right-of-way and implement other strategies that would allow development to occur in a manner consistent with future roadway improvements.
- Local roadway development on the part of Oakland County and the affected townships should be encouraged to provide alternative north-south routes for local circulation. Most of those routes that offer parallel service to M-15 are gravel roads.

Since the time of MDOT's Preliminary Project Statement traffic demand has continued to grow. And, the growth in Genesee County has increased to the point that projected travel demand now demonstrates a need for four travel lanes on M-15 in that county, as well as Oakland County (Figure 1-2).

1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to: (1) evaluate conditions surrounding the M-15 corridor between I-75 and I-69; (2) develop and evaluate improvement alternatives; (3) narrow those to practical alternatives, and finally a recommended alternative; and, (4) gain environmental approval from FHWA on the recommended alternative so that it can advance to the design phase. Corridor alternatives will be evaluated using objective criteria (including cost) in consideration of legal and regulatory requirements, and in cooperation with the general public and other interested parties.

This will be a cooperative process, affording early and continuing involvement of the general public, elected officials, public agencies and regulatory bodies, private providers of transportation, and other stakeholders in Oakland and Genesee Counties.

As noted earlier, the study area is bounded by I-75 on the south, I-69 on the north and a band generally one mile wide to the east and west of M-15. The study area boundaries may be reasonably expanded from these minimums as a result of the public involvement process, the study of new-corridor alignment alternatives, changes in travel patterns, and the like.

Alternatives to be examined are: (1) the no action (no build) alternative; (2) minor physical and operational improvements to roads in the M-15 corridor, sometimes referred to as Transportation System Management (TSM) techniques; (3) improvements to the existing local road infrastructure with no major changes to M-15; (4) reconstruction of M-15 to increase capacity including several potential roadway types on its existing alignment; and, (5) placement of M-15 on new alignment for some portion(s) of its length. The cooperative planning process will establish the range of roadway alternatives and will include the roadway type(s) and number of lanes, improvements to local roads, innovative roadway designs, improved access management, the use of demand management, and other operational improvements.

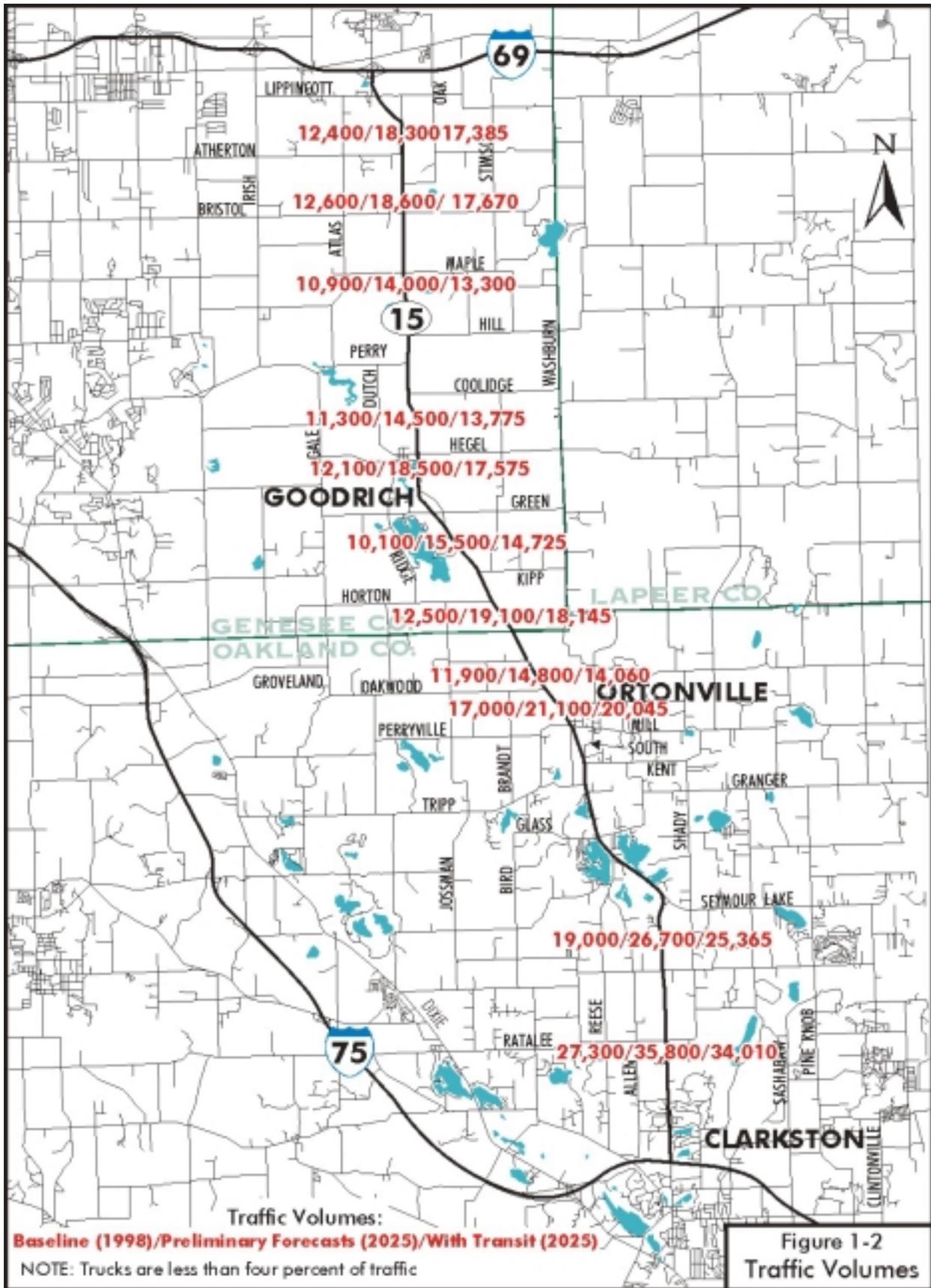


Figure 1-2
Traffic Volumes

1.3 Schedule

The project is scheduled for completion by early 2002 (Figure 1-3). Much of the technical analysis will come in the first half of the study with refinements and the review/approval process extending over almost another year. The review process is lengthy and exhaustive to ensure that the public has been heard and that all environmental impacts have been properly identified and addressed.

The first row in the schedule indicates ten milestones in the course of the project, including numerous meetings with the public. The first round of meetings was held in early June, 2000. It focused on introducing the MDOT/Consultant Project Team; defining the project schedule; and, soliciting improvement concepts as well as key issues of an environmental, social, and/or transportation nature. The next round of public meetings will be held in the latter part of August. At that time preliminary (illustrative) alternatives will be presented to the public for review. Preliminary traffic analysis related to the number of required lanes in the corridor to satisfy future travel demand will be presented. A workshop will precede the public meetings. It will examine alternative land use “what if” scenarios that could affect travel in the next 20+ years. Later, traffic data will be refined as localized traffic counts are conducted when school is back in session (and the repaving program of M-15 is complete). The traffic analyses will complete the project justification that will become part of the environmental document’s statement of purpose and need.

Following the August public meetings, results of technical studies will allow a screening/evaluation of the illustrative alternatives in late October or early November. Another round of public meetings will be held to gain input. As the alternatives are narrowed, a “scoping document” will be prepared. This informs the public and agencies at all levels of government of the practical alternatives under consideration and facilitates more in-depth agency involvement in the impact analysis and alternatives evaluation. Agency guidance will be instrumental in determining the final alternative consistent with legal and regulatory guidance.

Development of practical alternatives and the accompanying environmental analysis will be summarized in a technical memorandum to be completed by March/April 2001. This information will be summarized along with other required information in a document known as an Environmental Assessment. It will be the subject of comment at a Public Hearing scheduled for June 2001. Based on input from the public and ongoing dialogue with other stakeholders and agencies, further refinements will be made to the recommended alternative. A Recommended Alternative Report will be prepared after the Public Hearing. If no significant environmental impacts have been found, a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) will be sought from FHWA. If the interchanges at I-75 or I-69 are modified, Interchange Justification studies may be necessary. They document that any changes to the interstate highways are in the best interest of the public and that the changes do not compromise the functioning of the interstates as through travel routes. These studies require independent approval of FHWA.

Figure 1-3
M-15 Environmental Assessment Schedule

