

Results for September 2001 Business Operator and Patron Surveys Summary of Technical Memorandum

This report summarizes the results of a survey of business operators and patrons conducted as part of the US-131 Improvement Study in St. Joseph County, Michigan and Elkhart County, Indiana. Businesses on or within clear sight of US-131 between the Indiana Toll Road in Elkhart County and a point one mile north of Cowling Road in Three Rivers, Michigan were surveyed.

The aim of the survey was to gain insight into:

- The origins and destinations of patrons who use the businesses along US-131;
- The dependence of business along US-131 on through traffic and;
- The perceived importance of US-131 for business operators as well as an idea of their view of the potential impacts of proposed alternatives.

The survey consisted of two parts. A survey of business operators was conducted by the US-131 Team on September 10th to 12th while a survey of patrons was conducted from September 12th to 14th. Of a total of 136 business surveys distributed, 92 were completed during the week of the survey, with an additional 18 returned by mail for a total of 110 completed surveys. This represents 80.9% of the businesses that the US-131 Team attempted to survey. For the patron survey, 404 responses were collected at 20 separate businesses.

Business Operator Survey: Of the business surveys collected, 59.1% (65 respondents) were in Three Rivers, 21.8% (24 respondents) in Constantine, 8.2% (9 respondents) in White Pigeon and 7.3% (7 respondents) in northern Indiana. Business operators were asked to indicate their busiest period on an average weekday. Survey responses indicated that there was no single dominant period, although early mornings and evening periods were less busy.

A key finding of the survey was that 55.5% of businesses surveyed felt that 10% or less of their business came from unplanned stops by customers while only 4.5% felt that more than half of their customers were drive-by patrons.

According to business operators, the general outlook for business over the next ten years is very positive with 70.9% of respondents stating that the outlook was good and that they would consider expansion while 25.5% said the outlook was fair. No businesses said the outlook was poor while 3.6% gave no response or an “other” response. Throughout the US-131 corridor, survey responses indicated that the outlook is most positive in Three Rivers compared to the future outlooks in Constantine, White Pigeon and Northern Indiana.

The survey also sought the views of existing business operators regarding perceived potential concerns with the current US-131 facility and whether or not these issues affected their business. Difficulty in crossing US-131 is the most significant problem according to business operators (47.3%), with traffic congestion (36.4%) and “too many trucks” (26.4%) also being of some concern. Traffic congestion and truck traffic were of greatest concern among Constantine businesses.

Potential alternatives for US-131, “No-build”, “Improve Existing” and “Western Bypass” were presented to the business operators surveyed using maps. The business operators were asked to state whether they thought each alternative would increase, decrease or have no effect on their business. Most business operators (72.7%) felt that the “No-Build” alternative would have

no impact on their business. However, 42.7% felt that improving the existing alignment would increase their business while 42.2% said it would have no effect. When asked about a western bypass, 38.2% felt that it would hurt their business while 13.6% said it would increase business and 38.2% said it would have no effect. A western bypass was of greatest concern in Constantine where half of the businesses surveyed felt it would hurt their business.

Patron Survey Results: According to the patron survey, only 16.8% of trips by patrons can be considered through traffic. All other trips either originated from the study area municipalities (Three Rivers, Constantine and White Pigeon) or ended in them and can be considered locally based. Patrons were asked why they stopped at the business they were visiting. An overwhelming majority of patrons surveyed (91.1%) were aware of the business and had planned to stop there. Only 8.4% of patrons stopped because of advertising along the road or seeing the business itself. In Three Rivers, 93.5% of patrons planned to stop while patrons in Constantine and White Pigeon were less likely to be aware of the business in advance (87.1% and 81.0% planned stops respectively). Constantine also had a higher percentage of through traffic at 25.7%. Based on the survey responses, it is appropriate to assume businesses in Constantine are slightly more oriented towards drive-by customers than those in Three Rivers.

The survey also showed that gas stations were more dependent on through traffic (24.7%) and on unplanned trips (84.2% planned) than other businesses. These businesses may require some adaptation of service to avoid or minimize potential adverse effects of any relocation alternatives.

The reaction of business operators on the economic benefits of improving US-131 seemed mixed according to the survey results. 72.7% of respondents felt that selecting the “no-build” alternative would have no effect on their business, however, 42.7% felt their business would increase if the freeway were improved on the existing alignment. This indicates that businesses only foresee moderate economic gains if US-131 is improved.

The results of this survey will be presented as part of the Draft and Final Environmental Impact Statements for the US-131 Improvement Study. The results will be used as part of the social, economic and environmental analysis (SEE) to aid in the evaluation of alternatives for US-131 and the selection of a preferred alternative.