



United States Department of the Interior

National Park Service

Midwest Region
601 Riverfront Drive
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L7617 (MWR-PL/C)

Mr. Timothy Hill
Administrator, Office of Environmental Services
Ohio Department of Transportation
Central Office, P.O. Box 899
Columbus, Ohio 43216-0899

Dear Mr. Hill:

I appreciate you sending us the Tier 1 draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) for Eastern Corridor Multi-modal Projects, Hamilton and Clermont Counties, Ohio. The DEIS proposes a new bridge crossing the Little Miami National Scenic River. We have begun our preliminary review of the DEIS and would like to share with you our thoughts on the project. Further comments will be forthcoming in a Department of the Interior response.

The Little Miami National Scenic River (LMR) is a state-administered component of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. Ohio's comprehensive river protection program, which included the development of a river management protection manual (1980) and establishment of a Scenic River Advisory Council (Council), enabled the LMR to qualify for designation as a National Wild and Scenic River under section 2(a)(ii) of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (Act). The purpose for designating the LMR was to preserve its free-flowing character; water quality; and outstanding scenic, recreational, biologic, geologic and historic values.

I appreciate the collaborative process and approach taken in the development of the DEIS, and I look forward to the continued cooperative efforts on this important project. Clearly, the engagement of various local stakeholders in the Eastern Corridor Major Investment Study (MIS), which resulted in a recommended plan for addressing transportation issues in the project area and identified alternatives to be developed in the DEIS, was an important step in the process. The National Park Service (NPS) is a cooperating agency in the preparation of the DEIS, and as such I am troubled that the NPS was not included in key decisions made during the MIS planning process.

A greater concern is the removal of a viable option between the conceptual alternatives development phase and the DEIS. The relocation of State Route 32 was identified as a major issue in the MIS process. Option 2, which included the relocation of State

Route 32 without a new bridge crossing over the LMR had been actively considered as a conceptual alternative within the corridor, yet was eliminated in the MIS process in favor of option 1, which included a new bridge. While I understand the decision to eliminate this alternative was made upon the recommendations of the MIS Task Force, it is important to note the NPS, a critical stakeholder and cooperating agency, was not offered an opportunity to review and comment on the recommended plan, despite our letter notifying of our responsibility as the permitting authority for the LMR (August 26, 1997). ~~In addition, the absence of this option is in direct contradiction to the State's approved~~ management plan (LMR Assistance Manual, 1980) and is opposed by the Council. As a 2(a)(ii) river, we rely on the State of Ohio to protect and enhance the rivers Outstandingly Remarkable Values (ORV) per the State's river management plan, pursuant to the Act.

Given the concerns which we have expressed, the lack of the Council's support for removing the "no new bridge" alternative, and the incompatibility of the "new bridge" alternative with the State of Ohio's management plan for protecting the LMR, I would like to again urge you to fully evaluate option 2 in the final Tier 1 EIS. I firmly believe it is in the public interest to carry forth option 2 as a preferred alternative, particularly in light of the affected nationally significant resources. Option 2 supports the stated project purpose and need and the State's obligation to protectively manage this national river, pursuant to the Act.

As we have shared in past correspondence and in meetings, should the bridge design and construction activities qualify as a "water resources project" pursuant to the Act, then a section 7(a) determination would be required. Please be advised, it is our *preliminary* determination that any water resources project on the LMR directly related to the construction of the Little Miami bridge crossing, including temporary structures, could have a direct and adverse effect on the *scenic* and *recreational* ORV of the LMR.

The NPS has a continuing interest in working with the Federal Highway Administration to ensure that project impacts to resources of concern to the NPS are adequately addressed. I am committed to the Administration's principles of cooperative conservation and transportation infrastructure streamlining, and I look forward to finding a solution that ensures an environmentally sound, safe, and efficient transportation network is achieved in a timely manner.

Sincerely,



Ernest Quintana
Regional Director

cc:

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