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Media Contact: Betty Hull
859-414-5232 or betty@rasormarketing.com

Kentucky Transportation Cabinet Releases Study Confirming Need for Second Bridge to Carry I-71/75 Traffic Across Ohio River

Study notes that bypass options do not postpone the need for a new bridge, but the concept of an eastern bypass is recommended for further study to support regional development

FRANKFORT, KY (Dec. 19, 2017) - The Kentucky Transportation Cabinet (KYTC) today released the findings of a year-long study that confirms the need for construction of a new bridge across the Ohio River to improve safety and travel on I-71 and I-75 between Ohio and Kentucky. The proposed new bridge would be in addition to the existing Brent Spence Bridge, which was designed to carry 80,000 vehicles per day but currently carries more than twice that volume.

KYTC, under the direction of Governor Matt Bevin, commissioned the Brent Spence Strategic Corridor Study to analyze multiple options to relieve congestion and improve cross-river mobility in the Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky region. The study provides a data-driven, objective and transparent perspective on the most effective means of addressing transportation issues in the Brent Spence Corridor.

"This study confirms what many already suspected – a new bridge is needed, as well as improvements to I-71/75 to address the explosive economic growth along this important transportation corridor," said Governor Matt Bevin. "It is also imperative that we stay focused on the economic development potential of a bypass. To that end, I am requesting that a planning study for the Kentucky portion of an eastern bypass be included in the next highway plan."

The Brent Spence Strategic Corridor Study team was led by Stantec with support from AECOM and other consulting firms. Stantec and AECOM are global engineering firms with expertise in delivering complex infrastructure project analyses.

The team evaluated five concepts and examined their ability to ease congestion and improve travel by diverting traffic from the Brent Spence Bridge and other river crossings. Of these five concepts, two were advanced for more in-depth study based on their potential to divert traffic from the Brent Spence Bridge as well as probable costs. The Cincinnati Eastern Bypass and a concept connecting I-71/75 at the southern split near Walton, Kentucky, to the east side of I-275 in Ohio were further studied. The study led to the following conclusions:

1. A new bridge is needed in the Brent Spence Bridge Corridor (central city) to improve travel conditions on I-71 and I-75 between Ohio and Kentucky.

2. The existing Brent Spence Bridge is structurally sound and will remain in service to support safe and efficient travel across the Ohio River.

3. Estimated costs for the new bridge are \$2.3 billion in current year dollars and \$2.6 billion in future dollars, which assumes the new bridge would open to traffic in 2024.

4. The concept of an eastern bypass in Kentucky is recommended for further study based on the potential transportation and economic development benefits it could offer the region. It does not, however, postpone the need for a new bridge.

5. Additional improvements are needed at I-275 in Kentucky to provide acceptable levels of service for traffic that moves to and from the Brent Spence Corridor. This would include the widening of I-71/75 from Turfway Road north to the Brent Spence Bridge project (near Dixie Highway). These improvements would cost approximately \$289 million in current year dollars and \$399 million in future dollars.

“Conducting a study of this magnitude was a big undertaking,” said Kentucky Transportation Cabinet Secretary Greg Thomas. “I’d like to acknowledge the dedication of our KYTC team and outside lead consultants, Stantec and AECOM, who identified these key findings that will inform our next steps toward improving traffic and increasing capacity on both sides of the river. We appreciate the community input that contributed to the study.”

Secretary Thomas added that KYTC continues to work closely with the Ohio Department of Transportation to maintain the existing Brent Spence Bridge and to prepare for painting in 2019. Routine maintenance on the structure was completed in 2017.

Proposed new configurations will help improve safety on the existing and new bridges

The lane configuration currently proposed for the new double-deck bridge includes six lanes to carry I-75 northbound and southbound traffic (three lanes each direction); two lanes to carry I-71 southbound traffic and three lanes to carry local southbound traffic. The lane configuration currently proposed for the existing Brent Spence Bridge would include two lanes of I-71 northbound traffic and three lanes of local northbound traffic (see illustration).

Currently, many Brent Spence Bridge drivers choose the interstate route they need to follow while on the bridge. Under the proposed new configurations, route decisions will be made before crossing the bridge, therefore reducing the need to change lanes on the bridge and improving safety.

Local traffic will follow direct routes to local destinations

The study found that regional through traffic on the Brent Spence Bridge is estimated to be 12-20 percent of the average daily traffic. If the Cincinnati Eastern Bypass were built, it is estimated that traffic volume on the Brent Spence Bridge would be reduced by no more than 10 percent and that most of the reduction would be regional through traffic with local traffic continuing to use the most direct route to local destinations. Without a new bridge, significant congestion would remain between Kyles Lane and downtown Cincinnati despite the construction and cost of a new 75-mile roadway.

The study also concluded that while it does not postpone the need for a new bridge, the Cincinnati Eastern Bypass project is worthy of further exploration because of potential transportation and economic development benefits. Project costs were estimated at \$3.6 billion in current year dollars. Considering inflation over the more than 10 years it would take for the environmental, design, right-of-way and utility phases before construction could begin, cost in future dollars is estimated at \$5.3 billion (which assumes the project would open to traffic in 2032).

“While the collection and analysis of the data involved was complex, our task was straightforward. KYTC directed us to complete an objective, data-driven analysis of the most effective way to ease congestion along I-71/75 and improve cross-river mobility in the Greater Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky region and that is precisely what we did,” said Richard Sutherland, Senior Principal at Stantec, and project manager for the study. “We entered this study with no preconceived notions regarding the data itself or any related conclusions,” continued Sutherland. “We used industry-standard procedures and models to reach the conclusions set forth in the study report.”

Additional improvements at I-275 would support the Brent Spence Corridor

In addition, the study examined congestion and safety issues at the I-275 interchange in Kentucky and recommended additional modifications to support improvements along the Brent Spence Corridor. Proposed improvements would include the widening of I-71/75 from Turfway Road north to the Brent Spence Bridge project (near Dixie Highway). Estimated costs are approximately \$289 million in current year dollars and \$399 million in future dollars. Travel demand models indicated that widening south of Turfway Road to the I-71/75 split will be needed between the years 2030 and 2040.

The Brent Spence Strategic Corridor Study can be found online at transportation.ky.gov/bsbstudy.

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