

Executive Summary: Community And Displacee Impacts Involved in the Replacement of The Cooper River Bridges

Basic findings of the research reported here include:

- The new Cooper River Bridge will have a disproportionately high and adverse impact on minorities and low-income residents in the project area.

However, since this is a replacement project, the Charleston end is constrained by the need to connect to I-26 west of the Cooper River and serve Mt. Pleasant east of the Cooper River. This need, "combined with the extensiveness of the low income and minority population, makes it impossible to avoid concentrations of low income and minority persons in Charleston with the bridge replacement project." (FEIS, 1998)

- The overall impact of the New Cooper River Bridge will be mitigated somewhat because of the fact that it will follow along New Market Creek as it crosses the Charleston Peninsula to connect to Interstate 26. Impacts may have been greater had the area not been severely impacted/transformed by the construction of the Silas M. Pearman Bridge in 1966, the completion of Interstate 26 and the expansion of the portion of US Route 17 on the Charleston peninsula into four lanes in 1969.
- Historically Charleston's East Side has been one of the peninsula's most disenfranchised areas with the corresponding lower socio-economic challenges, such as high crime and high unemployment.
- At the time of the research, portions of the East Side as well as the entire Charleston peninsula have been subjected to other development pressures.

Development pressure on the East Side has been incrementally building since the opening of the Charleston Visitor's Center, and subsequent development of several pieces of commercial property above Calhoun Street in the early 1990s. In the face of a public outcry over the loss of several rental units on the City's West Side, the City formed an ad hoc task force on gentrification in 2000 to address the growing pressures on affordable housing.

- Efforts to enjoin residents and neighborhood organizations to participate in planning and mitigation strategies are quite likely hampered by the prevailing political culture, characterized by many as "traditional" in form. This has greatly impacted who participates, how issues are raised, and how issues/problems are discussed.
- An extensive door-to-door survey confirmed our suspicions that the perception of impacts diminishes geometrically as we move away from the immediate area of impact. Residents living as close as two blocks away thought the new bridge would have no substantive impacts on them. The greatest concern has thus far been with displacement, with substantially lesser attention paid to construction impacts and what changes will occur upon completion.

The door-to-door survey revealed a stable community of residents who appear to be well integrated into their community with relatives and friends who live close by. While some expressed a desire to move, most appear content to stay in the immediate neighborhood.

Based on the data obtained, we may question the representativeness of both neighborhood leaders and organizations.

Efforts to involve residents both in keeping them apprised of developments surrounding the new bridge as well as in planning mitigation strategies have met with mixed results. Most residents did not attend meetings organized by SCDOT.

The percentage of residents who thought the new bridge was part and parcel of a gentrification strategy to remove African-Americans from the community was surprisingly low. Individuals who attended bridge meetings were quite likely hostile to the new bridge before they attended the meetings. Attendance at meetings did not change their feelings.

Most residents in the area of highest impact appear to accept the bridge as inevitable—many even focus on its potentially positive benefits. Notably, they have not yet absorbed that significant neighborhood beautification, in the form of streetscaping, may take place as the bridge is built.

- Relocated homeowners were interviewed. They are all older, African Americans who had been in their former home or in the neighborhood most of their lives, with an average of 36 years in residence. All but one individual is over 50.

While all but one wanted to stay in the City, only four of the twelve residents interviewed have remained on the peninsula.

Most stated that there was some confusion, even though their questions were answered, about how their house value would be calculated. Also the time it took to identify suitable, affordable, potential homes was taxing on many of the residents.

Two individuals reported a smooth, trouble free move and expressed satisfaction with the new location. Two reported stressful experiences caused by a combination of personal, family and employment problems that coincided with the relocation.

- Sixteen (16) business owners or their representative were interviewed, including a dry cleaner, small grocery stores, construction company, salon supplier, and a mattress manufacturer.
- The Riley Institute researchers propose the Social Impact Model for transportation planning, designed to focus on an evaluation of what happens to a community during and after construction of a transportation project. The intention is to fill a gap in the existing models to explore all relevant issues connected to transportation construction projects.