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FDOT grants Location and Design Concept Acceptance for SR 684 (Cortez Bridge and Approaches) Project Development & Environment Study

Bartow, FL – On September 18, 2019 the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) Office of Environmental Management (OEM) granted Location and Design Concept Acceptance (LDCA) for the SR 684 (Cortez Bridge and Approaches) Project Development & Environment (PD&E) Study on State Road (SR) 684 (Cortez Road) from SR 789 (Gulf Drive) to 123rd Street West, a distance of about one mile in Manatee County, Florida. The study documented the evaluation of the No-Build (Repair), Rehabilitation, and Replacement Alternatives for the existing low-level drawbridge over Sarasota Bay. The study concluded that the Preferred Alternative is the replacement of the existing bridge with the 65-foot High-Level Fixed Bridge Alternative. Design is now underway and right of way is funded in Fiscal Years 2021, 2024 and 2025. Construction is not currently funded in FDOT's 5-year Work Program.

Following the Public Hearing and comment period, engineering analysis, environmental studies and interagency coordination, the No-Build (Repair) Alternative and Rehabilitation Alternative were not selected because they do not meet Purpose and Need. Of the remaining build alternatives, the 65-foot High-Level Fixed-Bridge Alternative was selected as the Preferred Alternative instead of the 35-foot Mid-Level Drawbridge Alternative for the following reasons:

- Vehicles and boats will have improved traffic flow with a 65-foot High-Level Fixed Bridge Alternative, which will eliminate congestion and delays caused by the existing drawbridge openings.
 - Based on data provided by the bridge tender and allowing for tidal fluctuations, the 65-foot High-Level Fixed-Bridge Alternative would allow approximately 98% of boats that currently require the existing bridge to open to safely navigate under the proposed structure. The remaining 2% of boats taller than 65 ft typically moor at facilities north of the Cortez Bridge, near the mouth of the Manatee River or Tampa Bay. These boats can use the Gulf of Mexico to travel south. Research documented in the *Boat Height Survey Technical Memorandum* (October 2016) did not identify any boats 65 feet tall or taller using the Cortez Bridge channel, due to the shallow nature of the channel.
 - Based on data provided by the bridge tender at the Cortez Bridge and allowing for tidal fluctuations, the 35-foot Mid-Level Drawbridge Alternative would only allow approximately 33% of boats to pass without an opening.
 - Results of the traffic analysis shows the travel time for the 65-foot High Level Fixed-Bridge Alternative is 2.38 minutes, compared to 4.15 minutes for a 35-foot Mid-Level Drawbridge Alternative.
 - There is no travel delay for the 65-foot High-Level Fixed-Bridge Alternative, whereas the travel delay for the 35-foot Mid-Level Drawbridge Alternative is 44.7 seconds/vehicle due to bridge openings.

- The SR 789 (Gulf Drive) intersection also performs at an improved level of service (LOS) with the 65-foot High-Level Fixed-Bridge Alternative (LOS B/B/B [westbound/northbound/southbound]) compared to the 35-foot Mid-Level Drawbridge Alternative (LOS D/C/D).
- The initial capital cost to construct a 65-foot High-Level Fixed-Bridge Alternative is approximately \$23.8 million less than the 35-foot Mid-Level Drawbridge Alternative.
- The Life Cycle Cost Analysis demonstrated that bridge replacement is a better financial investment compared to bridge repair, and the 65-foot High-Level Fixed Bridge Alternative is a better investment than the more costly 35-foot Mid-Level Drawbridge Alternative over the life of the bridge in terms of Net Present Value and Equivalent Annual Cost.
- The 65-foot High-Level Fixed-Bridge Alternative will have improved operational reliability compared to the 35-foot Mid-Level Drawbridge Alternative, especially in emergency situations and evacuation events, since there are no mechanical moving parts and electrical systems to malfunction, which could potentially close the bridge to traffic altogether. In addition, there is no chance of human error during the operation of a drawbridge.
- Comments received at the August 31, 2017 Public Hearing, where all costs and impacts were presented, indicated that of the responses that favored replacement, 75% favored the 65-foot High-Level Fixed-Bridge Alternative and 24% favored the 35-foot Mid-Level Drawbridge Alternative. The percentages do not add up to 100% due to some survey responses indicating no preference and others with multiple preferences.
- The 65-foot High-Level Fixed-Bridge Alternative provides opportunities for greater community cohesion and walkability with a roadway, sidewalks, and public space under the new bridge at 127th Street West. The 65-foot High-Level Fixed-Bridge Alternative is high enough to create an open space along the waterfront under the Cortez approach of the bridge. This could support a variety of public uses and amenities that can be implemented at the discretion of the local agencies. This new public space and grade separated access means that vehicles and pedestrians would not have to cross SR 684 (Cortez Road) at grade, resulting in improved safety. These opportunities are not possible with the 35-foot Mid-Level Drawbridge Alternative.

Additional information is available on the project website at www.CortezBridge.com.

The environmental review, consultation, and other actions required by applicable federal environmental laws for this project are being, or have been, carried out by FDOT pursuant to 23 U.S.C. §327 and a Memorandum of Understanding dated December 14, 2016 and executed by the Federal Highway Administration and FDOT.

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