Mitigating Impacts to the Pleasant Hill Neighborhood

THE I-16/I-75 INTERCHANGE PROJECT, MACON, GEORGIA
Case Highlights

**Description:** The community of Pleasant Hill in Macon, Georgia, was bisected by the construction of I-75 in the early 1960s. Forty years later, proposed improvements to the I-16/I-75 interchange had the potential to adversely impact Pleasant Hill once again. Thanks to the engagement of this historical Black/African-American community during the study of proposed improvements, with strong support from FHWA and the State DOT, potential adverse impacts of the selected alternative were minimized, and a mitigation plan was developed and incorporated into the project with a written commitment from all parties to its implementation.

**Key concepts:** Effective practices in addressing environmental justice include: community engagement in design and selection of an alternative as well as in mitigation-plan development; recognition of cumulative impacts; and collaborative and pro-active participation of community leaders and FHWA representatives in assisting the State DOT project team.
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Introduction

The community of Pleasant Hill in Macon, Georgia, was bisected by the construction of I-75 in the early 1960s. Forty years later, proposed improvements to the I-16/I-75 interchange had the potential to adversely impact Pleasant Hill once again. Thanks to the engagement of this historically Black/African-American community during the environmental assessment of proposed improvements, with strong support from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT), potential adverse impacts of the selected alternative were minimized, and a mitigation plan was developed and incorporated into the project with a written commitment from all parties to its implementation.

Project Context

The I-16/I-75 interchange in the City of Macon, in Bibb County, Georgia, was built in 1962-63, when interchange design was a relatively new science. By the 1980s, proposals were being discussed to improve safety and operational problems of the interchange. These problems included dense spacing of interchanges with local roads, limited turning-movement storage, and inadequate sight distance and decision time for traffic. As a result of these deficiencies, crash and injury rates for portions of I-16 and of I-75 along the interchange were considerably higher than Statewide crash and injury rates.

In 1995, the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) contracted services to develop potential project concepts, identify alternatives, perform environmental studies, solicit public input, and define final right-of-way limits.

The I-16/I-75 interchange project was proposed to add lanes, reconstruct bridges, widen shoulders, and develop a Collector/Distributor (C/D) system removing local traffic from the interstate main-line system. The project was expected to improve the Level of Service (LOS) of freeway segments and ramp junctions, and reduce crash and injury rates. The project location is shown in Figure 1.

The Region and the Community

Macon, the county seat, is a medium sized city in central Georgia. It had a population of approximately 97,000 in the year 2000. Blacks/African Americans were 62.5 percent of the population (Hispanics/Latinos were 1.2 percent) and approximately 25.5 percent of family households were below the poverty level. I-75 provides the main connection between Macon and Atlanta to the north and Florida to the south, while I-16 connects the city to the Port of Savannah.

The project area was initially defined as a ½-mile ribbon around the I-16 and I-75 right-of-way and then expanded to include the entire area of the neighborhoods intersecting with this ribbon. The expansion of the project area to include entire neighborhoods followed input from public consultation that revealed that
Figure 1. I-16/I-75 interchange project in Macon, Georgia, showing surrounding neighborhoods including Pleasant Hill.
neighborhoods were cohesive and that residents cared about impacts to entire neighborhoods.

Nine neighborhoods intersect the I-16/I-75 Interchange project area (see Figure 1): Riverview, Shirley Hills, North Highland, Fort Hill, East Macon, Macon Central Business District, Vineville, Winship Heights, and Pleasant Hill.

Minority and low-income populations in each of the neighborhoods were initially identified by comparing demographic data for block groups in the study area with data for the City of Macon, Bibb County, the Middle Georgia Regional Commission (MGRC represented 11 counties in Georgia), and the State of Georgia. Confirmation of the presence of low-income and minority populations was sought in site visits, community meetings, discussions and interviews with community leaders, and through planning and zoning officials, and local historians.

Among the nine communities identified and analyzed, minority and low-income populations (Census block groups) were identified in three: the neighborhoods of Pleasant Hill, Fort Hill, and East Macon. Impacts to these neighborhoods were considered in the environmental assessment for the interchange project; because no adverse impacts requiring mitigation were found to be necessary in Fort Hill and East Macon, this case study focuses on Pleasant Hill.

The Pleasant Hill neighborhood is a predominantly Black/African-American community just south of the junction of I-16 and I-75. It was organized in 1872 and is on the National Register of Historic Places. When I-75 was constructed in 1962-63, the neighborhood was split in two, a west and an east side, and approximately 133 houses and 2 churches were demolished. The division of the community into two sides separated residents from schools, churches, the community library, the Linwood Cementary, and the Booker T. Washington Community Center. Many residents left the community, circulation (moving from one side to the other) within the neighborhood drastically decreased, and the number of deteriorating structures increased. Figure 2 depicts the Pleasant Hill neighborhood in 1964 (green contour) and the I-75 right-of-way (in red) crossing the neighborhood.

In 2000, Pleasant Hill had a population of 1,611 people (982 on the west side, 629 on the east). Over 95 percent of the population was Black/African American. The east side was identified as having median household income below the poverty level. Median household income was substantially higher on the west side. Between 1990 and 2000 the neighborhood had experienced a 22 percent decrease in population. In 2000, 23 percent of homes were vacant and 70 percent of occupied homes were rented. A 2006 windshield survey showed that about 75 percent of homes were in good condition with most of the others in need of minor repairs. Streets were in very poor condition, and many areas lacked sidewalks.

Community resources in Pleasant Hill in 2000 included one public elementary school located on the west side (and two private schools), and the Booker T. Washington Community Center, an important meeting facility for neighborhood organizations, also on the west side. There were 13 churches dispersed throughout the neighborhood. The Black/African-American historic Linwood Cementary was also located on the west side. Figure 3 shows public housing in Pleasant Hill’s east side.
What Happened
The environmental justice analysis was one part of the broader analysis of community impacts, which also included noise and visual effects, displacement of structures, and impacts on community cohesion.

Community Involvement
Public outreach included audience meetings, a project website, a telephone hotline, media releases, a project post office box, a Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC), a project-specific newsletter, and a mailing list. Between November of 1999 and December 2008, 29 public/community meetings were held, including meetings with each of the nine communities, with participation ranging from 5 individuals [(at

Figure 2. Pleasant Hill neighborhood of Macon, GA, in 1964 (green) and the I-75 right-of-way (red).  

Figure 3. Lewis H. Mounts Homes public housing in Pleasant Hill neighborhood. 

a meeting between the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and the Pleasant Hill Neighborhood Improvement Group]
(PHNIG)] to 222 individuals (public-hearing open house).

At the start of the project, outreach efforts focused on a stakeholder network, developed based on past projects and initial participation in project open meetings. The CAC was also formed, and included private- and public-sector representatives as well as representatives of neighborhood associations.

The project team also held small meetings in neighborhoods. After the first meeting with the Pleasant Hill Neighborhood, a neighborhood representative was invited to be part of the CAC. After having three meetings in Pleasant Hill, the neighborhood formed the Pleasant Hill Neighborhood Improvement Group (PHNIG) and requested a fourth meeting in 2006. Led by a neighborhood resident with experience in transportation projects, this group became a proactive community liaison for GDOT from then on, stressing the past impacts that I-75 had on the community and forwarding suggestions for alternative modifications and mitigation measures that would be acceptable to the community. The leader of PHNIG’s past experience with transportation projects and residence in the community allowed him to help PHNIG be an effective instrument for merging project goals with community concerns.

Identification and Development of Alternatives

Based on an initial GDOT concept developed in the mid 1990s, a project team developed 10 different alternatives. The team also developed a set of evaluation criteria used to compare alternatives in work sessions with FHWA and Bibb County, through numerous public meetings, and with input from the CAC. The evaluation criteria included ratings for safety, reduction of driver confusion, congestion, constructability, cost, impacts to property, the environment, cultural resources, aesthetics, and accommodating pedestrians. Each element of the evaluation criteria was given a qualitative rating from excellent to unacceptable. The selected alternative (Alternative 9) was the only one not

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### Project Timeline for I-16/I-75 and the Pleasant Hill Community

- **1962-1963** – Construction of I-75 through the neighborhood of Pleasant Hill
- **1994** – Macon Metropolitan Planning Organization proposes basic concept plan for improvement of I-16/I-75 interchange in meeting with GDOT and the City of Macon Engineer
- **1995** – Improvement projects conceptualized by GDOT and included in the State Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) for Fiscal Years 1996-1998
- **1999** – GDOT with project team begins analysis of corridor to validate previous concept
- **2000 - 2005** – Community involvement includes several Pleasant Hill neighborhood meetings
- **2006** – First meeting with Pleasant Hill Neighborhood Improvement Group (PHNIG)
- **2008/2009** – Pleasant Hill Historic District and Community Mitigation Plan signed by FHWA, GDOT, and PHNIG
- **2009** – Memorandum of Agreement by FHWA, GDOT, and Georgia Department of Natural Resources Historic Preservation Division
- **2010** – Finding of No Significant Impact and start of project implementation
receiving a rating of unacceptable in any of the criteria elements while still providing safe and efficient operational traffic movements.

In developing Alternative 9, several modifications were made in coordination with the PHNIG to minimize impacts to the community. These modifications included the use of a graded slope rather than retaining walls to create more useable green space and generate less visual intrusion into the neighborhood, and a couple of modifications to roads.

**Analysis of Impacts and Mitigation Measures**

Direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts were analyzed for all nine communities identified. Of the three communities with minority and low-income populations, no disproportionately high and adverse impacts were identified in Fort Hill or East Macon. In Pleasant Hill, the project was expected to result in relocations, visual impacts, and impacts to community cohesion, but mitigation was included in the project to ensure that no disproportionally high and adverse impacts would occur. The expected direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts in Pleasant Hill, and the measures that were taken to address them are summarized in this section.

**Relocations**

The project would impact 31 residential structures in Pleasant Hill. Eleven of these structures were vacant, so 20 relocations would be required. This number included those that would be impacted because of the expanded footprint introduced by the mitigation measures (discussed in “Mitigation”).

An assessment of available housing in the Pleasant Hill neighborhood and Macon found comparable replacement dwellings.

**Visual Impacts**

The existing interstate facility was visible from neighborhood residences and roads. The highway expansion would deteriorate the viewshed of residences. The project team proposed to build noise/visual barriers as part of the mitigation of visual impacts, along both sides of the highway. Although project implementation without the noise barriers would have resulted in a negligible increase in noise, combined noise/visual barriers were included to reduce noise levels that were already high, under the no-action alternative. An orange balloon was set at the height proposed for the top of the noise/visual barriers and the expected change in the viewshed was assessed from several key points in the neighborhood. The impact was expected to be substantial: all views of the interstate would be blocked. When combined with other proposed measures, such as a linear park and greenspace adjacent to the noise/visual barrier, the quality of the view from residences would improve. Figures 4 and 5 show the impact of the proposed noise/visual barriers on the viewshed.

*Figure 4. Existing view (1812) from the west side of I-75 in Pleasant Hill neighborhood of Macon, GA, facing north.*
that cumulative or multiple adverse exposure from hazards should be considered when determining whether environmental effects are disproportionately high and adverse. The project team made an effort to better understand past impacts of the construction of I-75 to the Pleasant Hill neighborhood. The project team studied past documents that indicated that the current east and west sections of Pleasant Hill were connected by many pathways before construction of I-75, making travel through the neighborhood easy. A review of aerial photography allowed for an estimate of the number of structures displaced. An interview with a previous resident of the neighborhood who was displaced by the original construction of I-75 allowed for additional characterization of displacements as mostly single-family homes and some duplexes. This effort allowed a better understanding of adverse impacts the community would face with the interchange improvement project and without proper mitigation.

**Mitigation**

The development of mitigation measures was done in collaboration with the PHNIG. Mitigation measures included modifications to the alternative and measures to offset adverse impacts. Measures proposed by the Historic Preservation Division of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, such as the relocation of historic structures, were also discussed with the neighborhood.

Measures included in the mitigation plan were: a linear park along the east side of I-75 with a multi-use trail; noise and visual barriers; a heritage tour and historic documentation; improvements to local streets and sidewalks; reconstruction of a pedestrian bridge over I-75;
replacement of an open-channel concrete drainage ditch with a grass-covered culvert; and widening of the Walnut Street bridge to include 10-foot-wide sidewalks.

These community mitigation plan measures were incorporated into the selected alternative (Alternative 9). Many of them supported actions that had already been identified by the Pleasant Hill neighborhood as goals to be pursued and had been incorporated in the Pleasant Hill Neighborhood Plan. The mitigation plan was revised several times, since its first conceptualization, as a result of discussions with PHNIG.

Representatives of FHWA, GDOT, and PHNIG signed the Pleasant Hill Historic District and Community Mitigation Plan, which was attached to the end of the environmental assessment. This was considered by all parties to be an important commitment to the mitigation measures, and reassurance that no significant impacts would be left unaddressed.

**Effective Practices and Lessons Learned**

**Use a variety of sources and types of information to identify and characterize environmental justice populations.** In addition to the use of Census data, various other tools were used to better understand the circumstances of the various communities and, in particular, that of Pleasant Hill. Field surveys were conducted to identify community facilities and land use, and confirm presence of minority and low-income populations. Visual surveys were done to confirm housing vacancy rates and conditions as well as potential visual impacts. A pedestrian/windshield survey showed that streets were in poor condition. Interviews with local officials combined with public outreach meetings also allowed better understanding of the circumstances faced by communities. In addition, historic documents (transportation planning documents and aerial photography) and interviews with a past resident of Pleasant Hill provided important information on past impacts of the construction of I-75 on the community.

**Strong community leadership can foster the public-involvement process.** The presence of a strong community representation, with understanding of both the neighborhood reality and past transportation projects, stimulated GDOT engagement with the community. It also facilitated the public-participation process and communication between GDOT and the community. It was, in part, thanks to this strong community leadership that GDOT was able to engage with the community further than it had engaged with communities on previous projects.

**FHWA collaboration and involvement can support innovation.** Collaboration between FHWA, GDOT, and SHPO was important for development of appropriate mitigation for the Pleasant Hill Historic District. However, a key collaborative role in addressing environmental justice concerns in the I-16/I-75 Interchange project was how closely FHWA and GDOT worked together. FHWA strongly supported community concerns and recognized the relevance of past impacts from I-75 on the community. FHWA’s presence in community meetings and frequent interaction with the project team gave GDOT and the community the confidence and stimulus to correct prior impacts from a past State project. GDOT engaged with the community of Pleasant Hill to a greater extent than it was used to.

**Work with the State DOT and the Community to identify and ensure implementation of appropriate mitigation.**
Representatives of the Pleasant Hill neighborhood recognized early on that the proposed modifications to the I-16/I-75 Interchange would improve traffic safety, and focused on the minimization and mitigation of impacts rather than on opposing the project itself. The mitigation plan was developed with input from the neighborhood in several meetings, where neighborhood representatives had the opportunity to provide feedback on draft mitigation plans proposed by the State DOT and FHWA and suggest alternative measures. The initial 1999-project concept went through several rounds of modifications thanks to this process, and several elements from the neighborhood’s own plan (PHNIG’s Action Strategies) were incorporated into the mitigation plan. To ensure that the mitigation plan would be implemented and the final environmental assessment would transmit this assurance, the Pleasant Hill Historic District and Community Mitigation Plan was included as an appendix to the final environmental assessment and signed by representatives of FHWA, GDOT, and PHNIG.

**Benefits**

**For the Community**

The community mitigation plan will help compensate for direct and indirect impacts from the I-16/I-75 Interchange project on community cohesion, and the neighborhood’s landscape and aesthetic appeal, while preserving the community’s history.

**For the Agency**

The I-16/I-75 Interchange project set an example within GDOT of community engagement. Engaging the public from the definition of alternatives to the development and implementation of a mitigation plan simultaneously maximized the benefits of the project to the affected community while reaching its objective of enhancing highway operations and safety.

**References**

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