



Chapter 1: Project Introduction

1.1 Project Description

The Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT), in cooperation with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), has prepared this Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) to evaluate the US 31 Improvement Project from Plymouth to South Bend in Marshall and St. Joseph counties in Indiana. As shown in Figure 1.1.1, the US 31 improvement corridor is approximately 20 miles in length, running from the southern terminus at US 30, near Plymouth, to the northern terminus at the south junction with US 20, near South Bend. The communities of LaPaz, Lakeville, and the south edge of South Bend are within the limits of the project study area. Due to the fact that US 30 and US 20 are both functionally classified as principal arterials on the National Highway System (NHS) and as Statewide Mobility Corridors in the INDOT 2000-2025 Long Range Transportation Plan, they serve as logical termini for examining the need to improve this segment of US 31. Additionally, US 30 represents a major carrier of traffic and logical origin and destination point for US 31, and US 20 represents the last major east-west arterial within the study corridor. US 31 follows the US 20 Bypass to the west, while Old US 31 continues northward from the US 31 and US 20 interchange into the South Bend Metropolitan Area.

The existing US 31 is functionally classified as a principal arterial on the NHS. The NHS consists of about 155,000 miles of Interstate and principal arterial highways nationwide, designated by the United States Congress as having national significance. Existing US 31 provides four-through travel lanes throughout the corridor, each 12 feet in width. There are approximately 480 private driveways, 20 crossroad intersections, and 50 “T” road intersections along US 31 from US 30 to US 20. The character of the facility varies significantly along the 20-mile corridor with respect to the level of access control (frequency of driveways or public road intersections), median width/type, and shoulder treatment. The five-mile segment of US 31 from US 30 to Michigan Road (Old US 31) is a four-lane facility with a 50-foot depressed median and access limited to county public crossroads (i.e., partial access control). The remaining 15-mile segment of US 31 from Michigan Road (Old US 31) to US 20 either has no median or has a narrow median ranging from a flush four-foot median to a raised 16-foot median (sufficient only for a left-turn lane). Access within this 15-mile segment is controlled to adjacent property through driveway permits (i.e., no access control). Four traffic signals exist on this segment of US 31 and are located at US 6, SR 4, Kern Road, and Johnson Road. On-street parking is permitted along US 31 through the towns of LaPaz and Lakeville.

In general, agricultural areas dominate the land use in the southern portion of the US 31 corridor, from US 30 to the town of LaPaz. Through the towns of LaPaz and Lakeville, and through the south side of South Bend, the land uses along US 31 include churches, cemeteries, historic structures, businesses, and homes.

Regional Context

Between Plymouth and South Bend, US 31 is the primary north-south facility in the regional transportation network of north-central Indiana. Existing US 31 links the South Bend Metropolitan Area to Indianapolis and connects other communities (such as Lakeville, LaPaz, and Plymouth) in southern St. Joseph County and Marshall County. Referring to Figures 1.1.1 and 1.1.2, the primary east-west transportation facilities in the corridor are US 30 (running from Ft. Wayne through Plymouth to northwest Indiana), US 6 (running from Kendallville, to LaPaz, to northwest Indiana), and US 20 (running from Angola through Elkhart, Mishawaka and South Bend, to northwest Indiana). I-80/I-90 (Indiana Toll Road) is located just north of the corridor, and runs across northern Indiana from Chicago, Illinois to Toledo, Ohio.

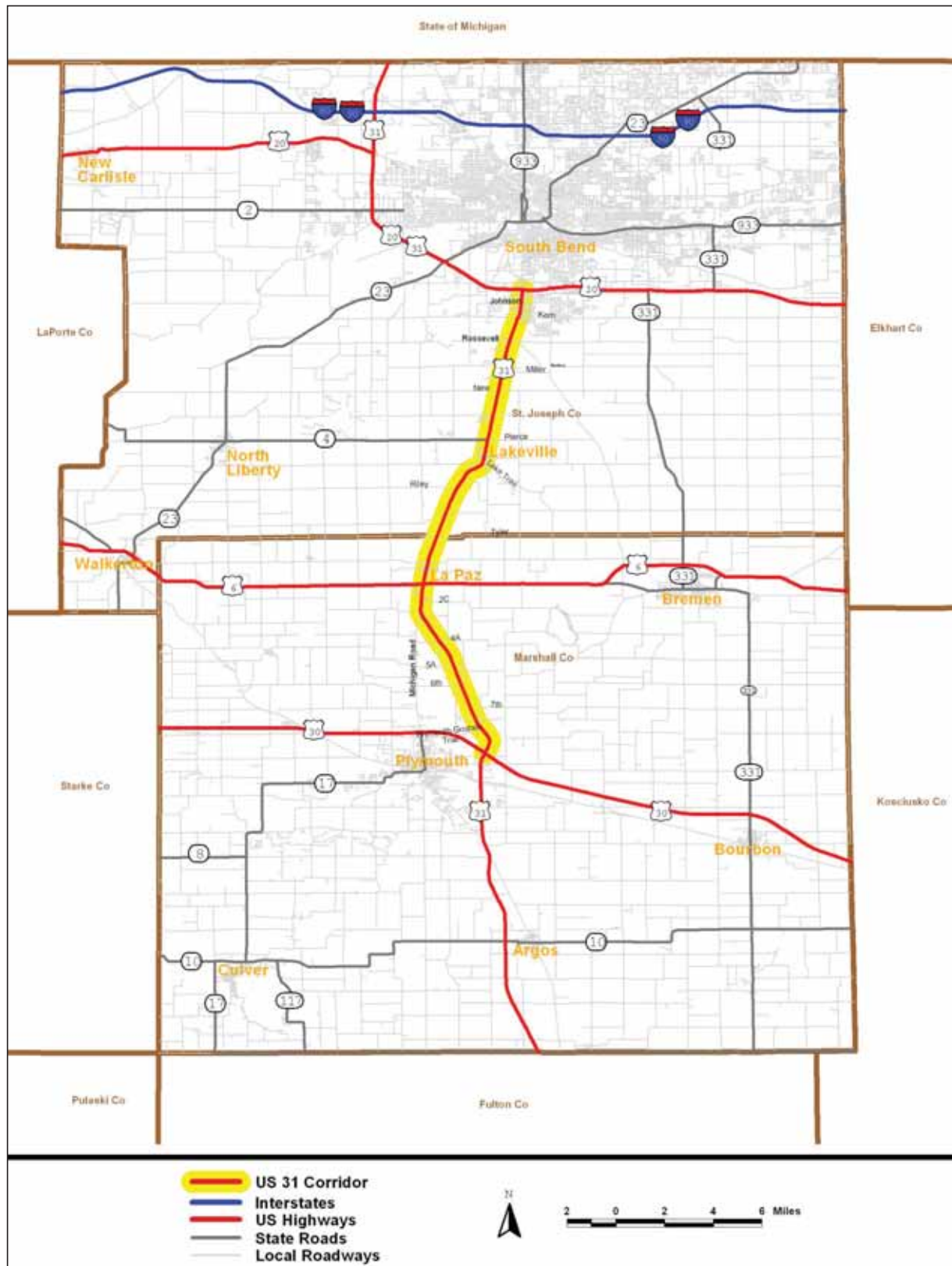


Figure 1.1.1: US 31 Regional Map



Figure 1.1.2: US 31 State Map



National Context

The present function and character of US 31 from Plymouth to South Bend has been established by national and state transportation system decisions over many decades. Prior to the construction of the Interstate Highway System, US 31 was a national highway facility (see Figure 1.1.3) running from Mobile, Alabama on the Gulf of Mexico through Montgomery, Alabama; Birmingham, Alabama; Nashville, Tennessee; Louisville, Kentucky; Indianapolis, Indiana; South Bend, Indiana; Benton Harbor-St. Joseph, Michigan; and Holland, Michigan to Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan on the Canadian border. When the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1944 called for the creation of a National System of Interstate Highways not to exceed 40,000 miles in length, states were given an opportunity to suggest additional routes before the official designation. The Indiana State Highway Commission (predecessor of INDOT) submitted four additional routes, one being from Indianapolis through South Bend to Benton Harbor. However, since Benton Harbor was not a major urban area and the proposed route was close to the Indianapolis-to-Chicago route (now I-65), US 31 from Indianapolis to Benton Harbor was not made a part of the National System of Interstate Highways as designated in 1947.

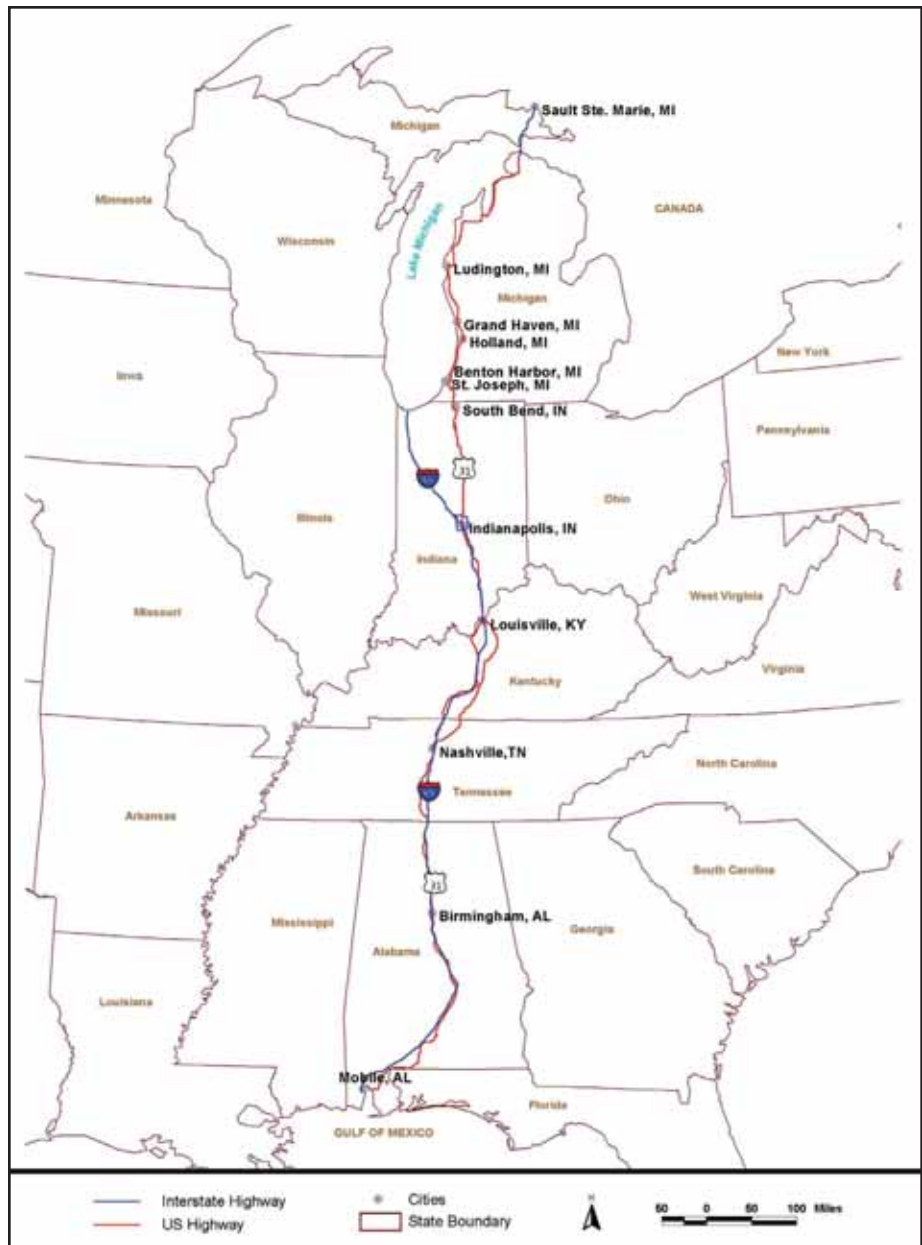
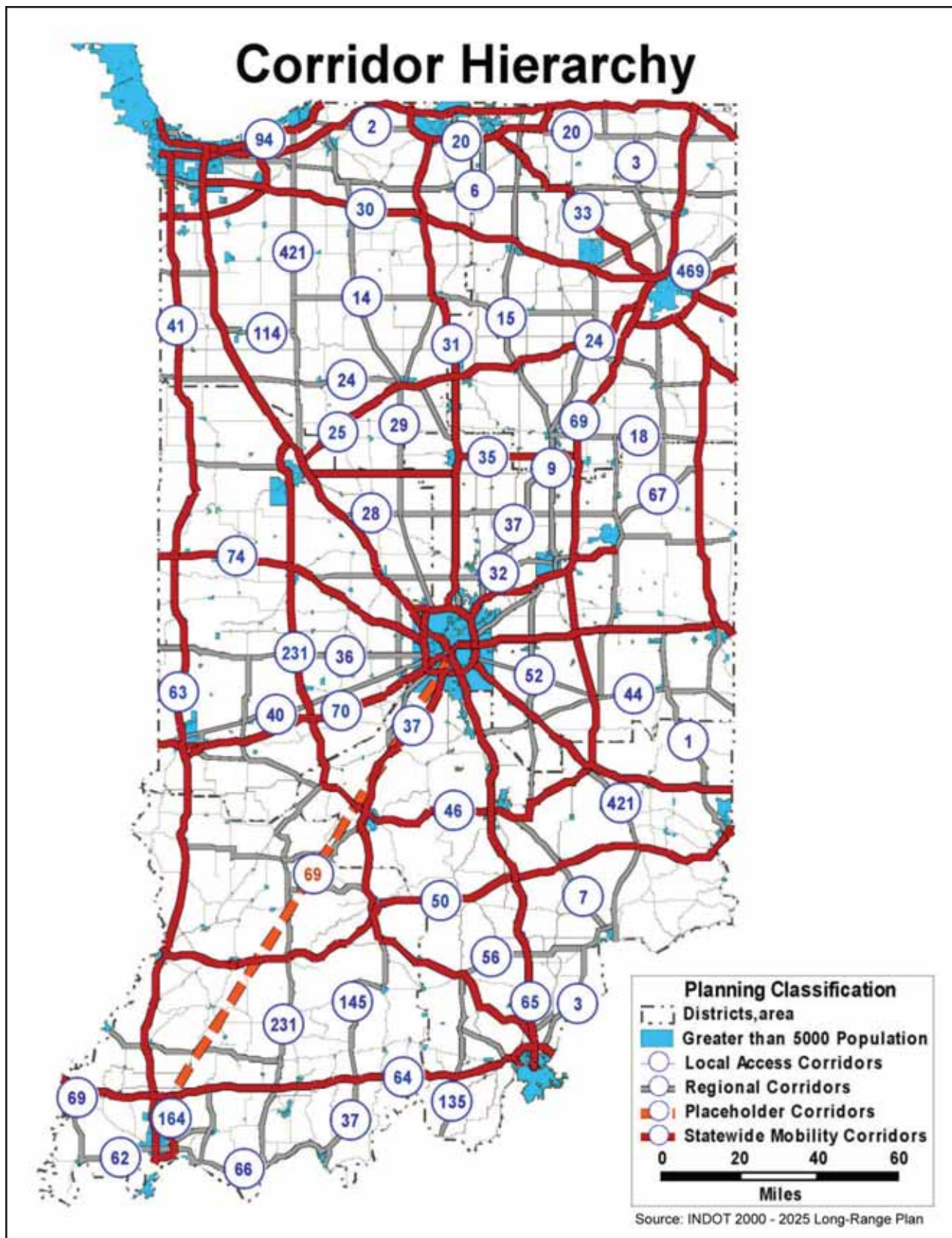


Figure 1.1.3: US National Map

When I-65 was completed, it provided a more appealing route than existing US 31 from Mobile to Indianapolis. Northward from the north leg of I-465 in Indianapolis, US 31 remained part of the NHS as a principal arterial with varying access control standards. At present, US 31 has been improved to full access control standards from the US 20/US 31 southern junction in South Bend, Indiana to Holland, Michigan, and from Grand Haven, Michigan to Ludington, Michigan.



Source: *INDOT Statewide 2000 – 2025 Long Range Transportation Plan*

Figure 1.1.4: Indiana Statewide Corridor Hierarchy



1.2 Transportation Planning History

For statewide planning purposes, the INDOT 2000-2025 Long Range Transportation Plan establishes a corridor hierarchy of three levels: Statewide Mobility Corridors, Regional Corridors and Local Access Corridors. Referring to Figures 1.1.2 and 1.1.4, US 31 from Indianapolis (I-465) to South Bend (US 20) is among the Statewide Mobility Corridors which consists of the highest level of highway facilities such as Interstates and most principal arterials. Such corridors have upper level design standards, high speeds, minimal travel delay, free-flowing conditions, and desirably no less than partial access control.

In the 107th Session of the Indiana General Assembly in 1991, legislation was passed directing INDOT to establish Commerce Corridors in the State of Indiana. These corridors were defined as “part of the recognized system of highways that:

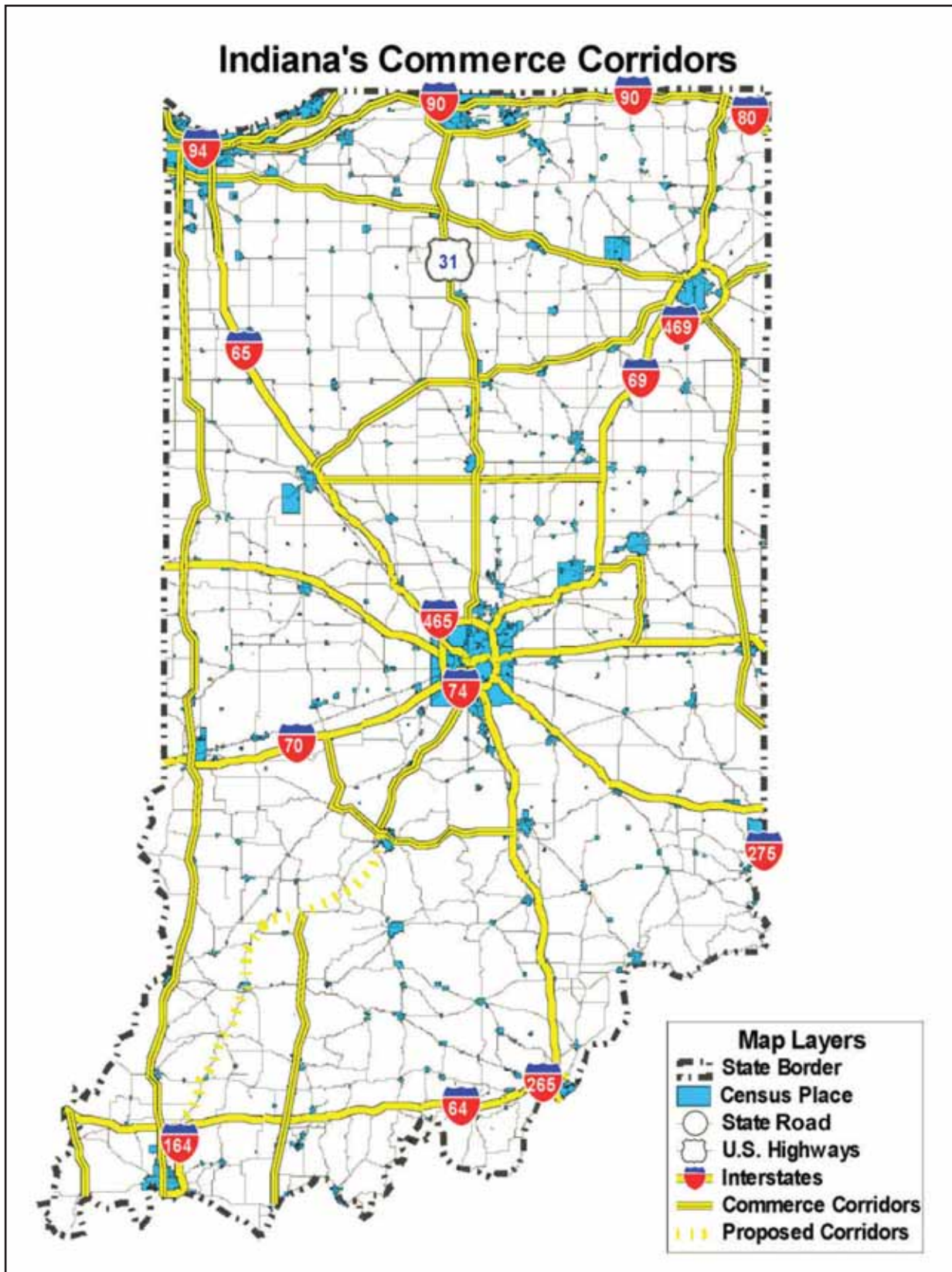
- directly facilitates intrastate, interstate or international commerce and travel;
- enhances economic vitality and international competitiveness; or
- provides service to all parts of Indiana and the United States.”

Referring to Figure 1.2.5, US 31 is also among Indiana’s Commerce Corridors which consists of the major commercial routes supporting the state’s economy. A Commerce Corridor connects major population concentrations to the NHS, and provides good connectivity to major manufacturing and trade service concentrations. It also improves access to tourism and recreation areas, economic concentrations, and those areas with demonstrated and anticipated potential growth.

The Commerce Corridor designation is more restrictive than the Statewide Mobility Corridor designation. The Commerce Corridor designation consists of Interstates plus select arterials that are identified as having significant importance to statewide and national transportation.

As a result of the statewide highway needs analysis, the INDOT 2000-2025 Long Range Transportation Plan proposes the “US 31 Freeway Upgrade from Indianapolis to South Bend.” In particular, the Plan identifies the need to improve US 31 in St. Joseph and Marshall counties, and the associated statewide Travel Demand Model (TDM) shows unacceptable congestion along portions of US 31 for the years 1998 and 2025 in these counties.

In addition to being a part of the INDOT 2000-2025 Long Range Transportation Plan, the need for improving existing US 31 has also been identified in the regional transportation plan. The transportation plan of the Michiana Area Council of Governments (MACOG), identifies the need to improve existing US 31 south of US 20 to a new limited access road with interchanges at several locations that would continue to US 30 in Marshall County.



Source: *INDOT 2000 – 2025 Long Range Plan*

Figure 1.2.5: Indiana Commerce Corridors



1.3 Project History

Along with the establishment of Commerce Corridors, the 1991 Indiana General Assembly directed INDOT to “undertake, as soon as possible, studies that will be required to improve the transportation corridor between St. Joseph and Marion counties. The department will conduct an origin-destination study and may address the following:

- any changes needed in the location of transportation facilities to improve the corridor, and
- the environmental impact of changes in the corridor.”

In response to Indiana’s Commerce Corridor legislation, INDOT initiated, in 1992 and 1993, three US 31 Major Investment Studies (MIS) in the US 31 Corridor from Indianapolis to South Bend. Pursuant to the 1991 Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), major investment studies were required in urbanized areas to examine transportation improvement options in corridors, and were intended to determine the preferred course of action. Completed in 1995, 1997, and 1998, respectfully, these three studies focused on how best to improve US 31 through the urbanized areas along the corridor:

- Howard County, in the greater Kokomo area, from south of SR 26 to north of US 35 (north junction with US 31),
- Hamilton County between I-465 and SR 38, and
- Marshall and St. Joseph counties from US 30 to US 20.

In 1998, INDOT also completed a study examining the economic impacts of improving US 31 from Indianapolis to South Bend. Following further legislative action by the Indiana General Assembly, INDOT completed the Indianapolis to South Bend Toll Road Feasibility Study in 1999 assessing the viability of funding US 31 improvements as a toll facility. This study found a toll road to be infeasible.

In accordance with the public notification requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA), INDOT initiated this EIS in 2002 with the publication of the Notice of Intent (NOI) in the Federal Register to prepare an EIS, focusing on the urbanized area at the north end of the 122-mile US 31 corridor. This US 31 EIS will adhere to all applicable environmental laws, regulations, and guidelines including, but not limited to, the following:

- NEPA,
- FHWA Technical Advisory T6640.8A, “Guidance for Preparing and Processing Environmental and Section 4(f) Documents” (1987),
- FHWA regulations,
- Council of Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations,
- INDOT’s Procedural Manual for Preparing Environmental Studies (2003), and
- Indiana’s Streamlined EIS Procedures (July 2001)



The NOI to prepare an EIS for the US 31 Improvement Project was published in the Federal Register on March 26, 2002. An Early Coordination Letter was sent to resource agencies on August 6, 2002. Copies of agency correspondence are included in Appendix C. The DEIS was made available for review and comment on February 13, 2004. The formal comment period began March 5, 2004, with the Federal Register notice of the availability of the DEIS. The public comment period extended 52 days (regulations require a minimum 45 day comment period) and concluded on April 26, 2004. A Public Hearing to discuss the findings of the DEIS was held on March 18, 2004.

Environmental Impact Statements are also currently underway for US 31 improvement projects from I-465 to SR 38 in Hamilton County (US 31 Improvement Project), and from approximately two miles south of SR 26 to approximately one mile north of US 35 in the City of Kokomo in Howard County (US 31 Kokomo Corridor Project).



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