

The Mobile Bay Causeway

Existing Conditions & Enhancement Opportunities

March 31, 2002

COASTAL PROGRAMS SECTION
DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION & NATURAL RESOURCES
STATE OF ALABAMA
DON SIEGELMAN, GOVERNOR

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Section I: Introduction

What is the Purpose of this Report?

There are few places that truly meld a scenic natural environment with a unique setting of man-made structures. These landscapes are often described as “having a sense of place” - a context that connects an area’s history, culture and ecology.

Typically, the best examples are found in areas possessing natural scenic beauty that have not yet felt the pressures of modern development trends. In these places, unique regional and cultural approaches to land use have not been supplanted by the national franchise developments and landscape treatments that have made so many areas in America so visually interchangeable.

The Mobile Bay Causeway, situated at the confluence of the five river Mobile-Tensaw Delta and the expansive Mobile Bay is an eight mile roadway unprecedented in its natural exposure. It is the apex of ecological, cultural and recreational activities. From this vantage point, a watery working landscape straddling the line between freshwater rivers to the north and the salty waters of the Gulf Coast to the south can be observed and experienced. It has diversity of scenic charm and recreational opportunities special to this region. It is an area in harmony with the history and culture of our area. And it is an area worth preserving and enhancing as a unique resource for citizens and visitors to Coastal Alabama.

For decades, natural resources protection needs and economic enhancement opportunities related to the Mobile Bay Causeway and its surrounding waterways have been explored.

During the past two years, a stakeholders’ initiative has evolved into *The Scenic Causeway Coalition*. A consensus of interested citizens, and representatives of nonprofit environmental groups, government agencies, educational entities, recreational and business interests, and local property owners adopted the following as the mission of the Scenic Causeway Coalition:

“to promote the recreational and commercial viability of the Mobile Bay Causeway and to improve the environmental integrity of the Upper Mobile Bay and Lower Delta ecosystems.”

The *Scenic Causeway Coalition* has identified the following as principle objectives to further this mission:

1. To protect wetlands and existing watercourses surrounding the Causeway from both pollution and conflicting uses by encouraging requirements for sufficient vegetative open spaces and water buffers between land uses and water activities; and encouraging usage of best management and “good housekeeping” practices in all uses and activities to minimize non-point source pollution.
2. To encourage re-development and new development along the Mobile Bay Causeway to be compatible with a low profile *vernacular* style of design in order to promote cohesiveness and a shared aesthetic in building materials, colors, and of scale consistent with the natural landscape features around the Causeway.
3. To encourage both private and public development endeavors to create and maximize opportunities to provide physical, visual and interpretive access to the coastal resources surrounding the Mobile Bay Causeway
4. To seek and receive National and State Scenic Byway Designation for the Mobile Bay Causeway. (Achieving this objective may serve as a strategy to facilitate the other principle objectives.)

Nomination criteria for consideration as a National Scenic Byway requires development of a ***Corridor Management Plan*** pursuant to the Scenic Byway Program’s very comprehensive guidelines. Included within these guidelines are the procedures that must be followed to receive designation.

The initial step in developing a Corridor Management Plan is an investigation of existing conditions, an analysis of the “intrinsic qualities” (as defined by the Scenic Byway Program), evaluation of opportunities and constraints, and recommendations for the area proposed to be included within the Scenic Byway designation. This information then becomes the basis and gives direction for developing further elements of the Corridor Management Plan.

In recognition of its need for professional expertise, The Scenic Causeway Coalition sought assistance in developing the preliminary information, and during the Summer of 2000, Professor Brian J. LaHaie of the Landscape Architecture Program at Auburn University, was contracted through the DISL/ Coastal Policy Center with funding through the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, State Lands Division, Coastal Section and the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration’s Office of Ocean & Coastal Resources.

This report represents Professor LaHaie’s and the Dauphin Island Sea Lab/Coastal Policy Center’s analysis of existing conditions and recommendations for enhancements. Additionally, concept sketches are presented to illustrate proposed enhancement opportunities.

Section II: Existing Conditions on the Causeway

What is the history of this area?

Construction of the Mobile Bay Causeway, a series of man-made earthen bridges connecting Mobile and Baldwin Counties, was begun in 1926 and completed in 1927. At the time of its construction, limited funding and bridge technology favored constructing the Causeway on fill soil spanning the shallow bay rather than attempting to span the distance with raised bridge structures.

From 1927 until 1978, the Mobile Causeway (or Battleship Causeway as it is sometimes called) was the primary automotive route between Mobile to the west and the “Eastern Shores” communities of Spanish Fort, Daphne, and Fairhope.

In 1941, with the completion of the Bankhead Tunnel under the Mobile River, the Causeway was improved and expanded to a four-lane roadway to better meet the needs of increased traffic and a more mobile population.

By 1976, more than thirty thousand vehicles a day crossed the Causeway on average. Traffic congestion on the Mobile Causeway was greatly reduced in 1978 with the completion of the “Jubilee Parkway”, also known as “The Bay Way,” the elevated interstate highway (I-10) structure that currently intersects the original Mobile Causeway.

Historically and prior to the construction of the Mobile Causeway, Mobile Bay and the surrounding landscapes were the sites of early Indian settlements, historic battlegrounds, and numerous forts and encampments.

Early explorers sought refuge in, and control of, the mouth of Mobile Bay and the resources and trade routes upstream. In a period of 160 years between 1702 and 1861, six different flags flew over Mobile and the surrounding bay area. Spanish, French and British soldiers and colonists all occupied this region and all left cultural and archeological remnants of their presence. During this period of conflict and control, many forts and secured settlements were built and remain as historic reminders of previous conflicts in the area. Local examples include: Fort Conde, built in 1720 under French rule; and Fort Morgan and Fort Gaines, both Civil War structures; and Historic Fort Mims, the site of the largest Indian-led massacre (in 1813).

Other sites of historic significance include the settlement of Blakeley (now Blakeley State Park), site of the Civil War’s last battle and the prehistoric Indian mounds at Bottle Creek. Both of these sites are located north of the Mobile Causeway in the Mobile-Tensaw Delta.

What conditions currently exist?

The man-made islands and bridges that make up the Causeway and the buildings and homes that have inhabited this landscape have been exposed to more than 70 years worth of storms, floods and hurricanes with little or no protection.

Today, the narrow strips of land and bridges that comprise the Mobile Causeway, remain semi-frozen in time. The abandonment of this linear landscape, caused by the construction of the I-10 Bayway and the periodic removal of modern development via hurricanes and tropical storms, has led to a settlement pattern and landscape that has remained relatively unchanged and unsettled by modern development standards.

However, the Causeway at the time that this report was written is the location of many active businesses and activities including: approximately 7 restaurants, 5 lounges / bars, 3 hotel/ motels, 6 fish camps, 2 gas stations, a rehab center, a State fish and wildlife office, a transmission shop and an ecotour outfitter. (Many businesses appear to be thriving while others appear to be struggling).

Two relatively large parks occupy and anchor the east and west ends of the causeway. To the west, Battleship Memorial Park, supports and gives reverence to the various memorials and military artifacts. Meaher State Park occupies a large area of land near the eastern end of the Causeway and includes developed campsites, boat and recreational access and substantial wetlands areas.

As the man-made causeway has aged, it has softened its hard edges despite man's continuing efforts to stabilize the structure. Nevertheless, erosion, sedimentation, and the ever-shifting streams and channels of the Delta have helped create a matrix of grassy marshes and wetlands surrounding the Causeway.

Associated with these nutrient rich grasslands and tidal marshes are the aquatic fin and shell fish, reptiles, mammals and bird species which find this habitat favorable to their survival.

What are the governing jurisdictions?

At the time of this report's publication, the Causeway road frontage properties east of the Tensaw River are incorporated into the City of Spanish Fort and road frontage west of the Tensaw is within the City of Mobile.

Portions of the Mobile-Tensaw River Delta north of the Causeway are unincorporated.

What utilities are available?

Utility infrastructure is varied along the Causeway. The right-of-way along the north side of the Causeway contains raised, high voltage electrical transmission lines. Sewer service, provided by the Mobile Area Water and Sewer System, exists on the portion of the Causeway west of the I-10 interchange. Hookup to the sewer service is not mandatory under local codes. East of the interchange is currently serviced exclusively by septic systems and individual sewage packing plants. There has been some discussion by the City of Spanish Fort regarding the installation of sewer lines in their jurisdiction.

The Mobile Area Water and Sewer System has historically provided water service to the area of the Causeway west of the I-10 interchange and the Spanish Fort Water System has served the area east of the interchange. However, in an agreement finalized in 2001, MAWSS began laying a water main the entire length of the Causeway to Spanish Fort to supplement the Spanish Fort's water supply.

Description and Condition of the Roadway

According to recent maps, the Mobile Causeway is listed as Alabama Highways 16 and 42 and U.S. Highways 90 and 98. Prior to the construction of the I-10 Bay Way in 1978, the Mobile Causeway was the only accessible crossing of the broad Mobile Bay for many miles. These four highways “pinched” together at this unique man-made crossing of the upper Bay, then split to go their separate ways on either side of the Bay.

Originally built as a two-lane road, the Causeway has now been widened to four lanes (two in each direction) for the entire eight-mile stretch.

For the purposes of this assessment, the Mobile Bay Causeway will be defined as the 8-mile stretch of road beginning at the exit of the historic Bankhead Tunnel to the west and continuing to the Baldwin County Visitor’s Center and Scenic Overlook to the east.

Along this road there is but one intersecting road (I-10 at a grade-separated interchange) and no stoplights or major traffic signals. The speed limit for the Causeway is currently signed at 55 MPH for the entire length of travel.

A trip across the Causeway crosses four rivers and Mobile Bay over four bridge spans. Due to high traffic volumes at these popular destinations, major turning movements take place in the western section of the Causeway at the entrance to the Battleship Park and at the entrance to the Original Oyster House Restaurant. In both situations adequate turning lanes are available to accommodate traffic at its current rate.

The general condition of the road is good with adequate shoulders and separated medians throughout much of the eight-mile section. Pedestrian and bicycle traffic are not adequately provided for, separated or protected from vehicular traffic at this time.

The Mobile Bay Causeway - Existing Conditions and Enhancement Opportunities

Overhead view of the City of Mobile, Mobile River and Alabama State Docks, I-10 and western side of the Mobile Bay Causeway



The Mobile Bay Causeway - Existing Conditions and Enhancement Opportunities

Overhead view of I-10 on the right side, and the Mobile Bay Causeway looking West with the City of Mobile in the background.



What Land Uses Exist Along the Causeway?

For this study, it is appropriate to divide the Causeway into two easily definable sections to address land use. The “western section” from the Bankhead Tunnel to the I-10 interchange (approximately 3 miles) and the “eastern section” from the I-10 interchange to the eastern boundary (approximately 5 miles). Each of these two sections have differing land use patterns and differing relationships with the I-10 Bayway.

In general, existing land use in the western section of the Mobile Bay Causeway have been associated with easy access on and off of I-10. Establishments offering gas, food and liquor have been successful in this short section.

Within several hundred yards of exiting the Bankhead Tunnel driving eastbound, travelers pass under the I-10 Bay Way (the raised interstate constructed in 1977). For the next two to three miles, the Causeway continues to maintain

close visual contact with the raised interstate as the two roads run parallel to one another — I-10 to the north and the Mobile Bay Causeway to the south. In this section, land on the southern side of the roadway is expansive with large tracts owned by shipping industries with little or no development at this time. A large tract on the south side is a dredge fill site, with adjacent sites consisting of a restaurant (Captain’s Table) and Best Western Motel. Land to the north of the road is narrow but with good water access and is occupied with two fish camps and a small long (Liz’s Haven).

To the south side of the road and prior to crossing the Tensaw/Spanish River bridge is Battleship Memorial Park - a unique collection of memorials and military hardware featuring the USS Alabama Battleship. The battleship and park continue to be one of Alabama’s top tourist attractions and is a visual landmark anchoring the western section of Causeway.

After crossing the first of four bridges going east bound, the land width narrows on both sides of the road but particularly on the south side. On the north side is the Original Oyster House restaurant - a Causeway institution for over 50 years, and an adjacent gas station. On the south side is a collection of abandoned gas stations and Argiro’s - a gas station and take-out food institution. This side has great views to the battleship and to the City of Mobile skyline on the distant horizon.

As a traveler continues to eastbound, the raised I-10 Interstate now begins to curve back toward the Causeway on the north side visually corralling the Ramada Inn and adjacent Texaco gas station, R&R Fish Camp and radio station WLTV. Immediately across the road from the Ramada Inn is the popular Pier 4 restaurant (now re-named “The Fish Camp”). Proceeding eastward, the raised Interstate quickly intersects with the Causeway in a swirl of on and off ramps.

From this point the Interstate extends to the south side of the causeway and begins to increase

its separation as both roads continue in an easterly direction toward the Eastern Shores communities of Spanish Fort, Daphne and Fairhope.

Land uses in the eastern section of the Causeway are equally diverse, but with slightly less accessibility as a traveler continues in an easterly direction and away from the I-10 Interchange. For the next mile or so there is essentially little or no stable land on either side of the road. Although probably not feasible for commercial construction, this section provides good views to the Delta and Mobile Bay on either side.

Continuing eastward toward the Apalachee River Bridge, development is non-existent on the south side of the road with the exception of Ed's Seafood Shed. Across the street on the north side, a variety of land uses exist and take advantage of water access via a dredged pass running behind the property connecting the Apalachee River and the Chacaloochee Bay. This concentrated grouping of businesses and service establishments include three lounges, a motel, two popular

restaurants, a spring manufacturer and an ecotour outfitter.

Moving eastward the section of land between the Apalachee River and the Blakeley River is a sparsely populated areas with property owned primarily by the State of Alabama and managed by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) State Lands Division. On the south side of the causeway is Meaher State Park land and public boat ramp, and ADCNR holds other small tracts of land along the Causeway.

On the north side of the road among large State of Alabama land holdings are a scattering of private businesses including an adaptive reuse of a former hotel into a dependency treatment center, a transmission shop, and a tax and real estate office, and a small ten to fifteen residence housing subdivision.

Also on the north side of the Causeway across from Meaher State Park is the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries District 5 Office.

After crossing the Blakeley River and before going up grade toward the Baldwin County Visitor's Center, there is a small peninsula of land on either side of the road with several fish camps on the north side and a nursery and lounge on the south side.

As evidenced by the following "snap shots" of existing conditions taken in the summer of 2000 and 2001, the land uses along the Causeway can be summarized as varied and without a recognizable order or pattern.

The Mobile Bay Causeway - Existing Conditions and Enhancement Opportunities

PHOTO #1 - View of Causeway looking to the East



The Mobile Bay Causeway - Existing Conditions and Enhancement Opportunities

PHOTO # 2 - View looking West to City of Mobile, Battleship in background on south side of Causeway.



PHOTO # 3 - Abandoned and dilapidated structures north side of Causeway



The Mobile Bay Causeway - Existing Conditions and Enhancement Opportunities

PHOTO # 4 - Abandoned and dilapidated structures - north side of the Causeway



PHOTO # 5 - Abandoned and dilapidated structures - north side of the Causeway.



PHOTO # 6 - Houseboats, fishcamps along north side of Causeway — I-10 in background.



PHOTO # 7 - Existing “Drifters” Bar and boat ramps - north side of Causeway.



PHOTO # 8 — Existing Gas Station and Convenience Store -north side of the Causeway - I 10 in background.



The Mobile Bay Causeway - Existing Conditions and Enhancement Opportunities

PHOTO # 9 — Wide shoulder of south side of Causeway, I-10 upramp and overpass in the background



PHOTO # 10 — Looking East, grassed boulevard bisects Causeway.



PHOTO # 11 — Looking East, existing bridge conditions.



PHOTO # 12 — Existing business - north side of Causeway



PHOTO # 13 -Entrance to Meaher State Park - south side of Causeway



PHOTO # 14

Mizell's Fishing Camp - north side of the Causeway



PHOTO # 15

Houseboats / Fishcamps on north side
of the Causeway.



Section III: National Scenic Byway's "Intrinsic Qualities" Criteria

Definition of "Intrinsic Qualities":

According to the National Scenic Byways Program, intrinsic qualities are defined as "features that are considered representative, unique, irreplaceable, or distinctly characteristic of an area". In combination, these qualities define the character, interest and appeal of a given roadway and set it apart from other roads in the area. Intrinsic qualities may be natural or man-made and may respond to the past, present or future of a given site or landscape.

The most important intrinsic qualities of a site are those that are unique and can be artfully interpreted to travelers and visitors in a comprehensive "travel experience" or "story line".

The National Scenic Byways Program defines six intrinsic qualities that provide the basis for Scenic Byway designation: *archeological, cultural, historic, natural, recreational, and scenic*.

What is meant by Archeological Quality?

A site or roadway exhibits archeological quality when it contains physical evidence of significant cultural history. This evidence may include ruins, artifacts, structural remains, or other physical evidence of prior human activities. In order to exhibit archeological quality, a site or roadway must contain the presence of physical remains. In addition, the physical artifacts must exhibit scientific significance and should be visible to the visiting public. A site or roadway without physical evidence of significant archeological history may not qualify under the category "Archeological Quality", but may exhibit historic or cultural qualities. The primary purpose of this intrinsic quality category is to allow communities the opportunity to promote and protect significant archeological treasures.

What is Cultural Quality?

Expression of cultural quality in a site or roadway is an opportunity to celebrate the unique customs or traditions of local people or of ethnic communities.

Expressions of cultural quality may include arts, crafts, music, dance, rituals, legends, customs, festivals, foods, special events and vernacular architecture. In order to be significant, these cultural expressions must be unique and exhibit an authenticity and connection to the place. A community's geography, economy, community and domestic lifestyles and artistic expressions may influence cultural quality.

Many of the other intrinsic qualities may be interconnected or may overlap with cultural qualities. Cultural expressions often evolve out of historic, natural or recreational customs.

What is considered Historic Quality?

Our national heritage and history has been recorded in its people and its landscapes. Sites and roadways that contribute to the preservation and interpretation of significant historic persons, events, movements, styles or cultures may exhibit intrinsic historic qualities.

When properly presented, preserved and interpreted, these landscapes and historic features educate the visitor and stir an appreciation of the past.

In order to meet Scenic Byway designation, these historic landmarks must be significant and must contribute to a consistent story line or theme that relates to the evolution of the Nation and its people.

Evidence of historically significant structures and places may be demonstrated by designation under the following programs:

- Historic American Building Survey
- Historic American Engineering Record
- Historic American Landscape Survey
- National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark Program
- National Historic Landmarks Program
- National Register of Historic Places
- State Historic Marker Programs
- State Register of Historic Places
- World Heritage Sites