

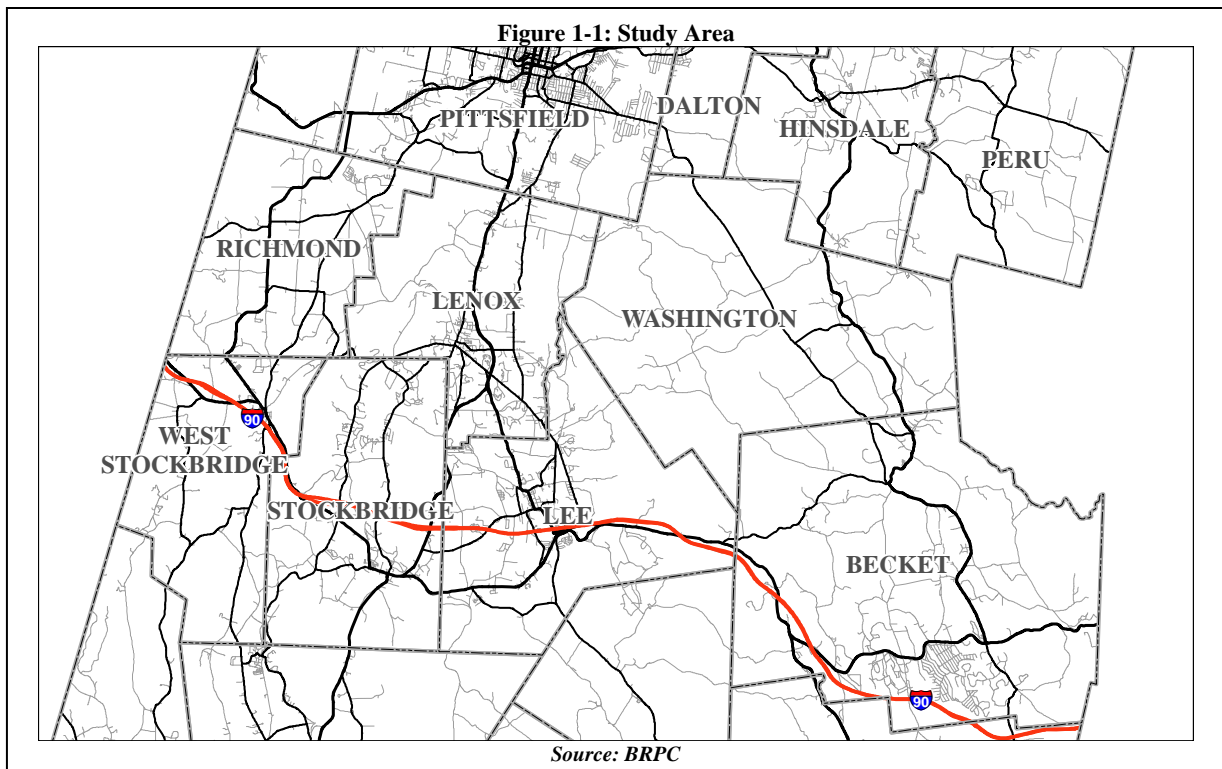
Introduction

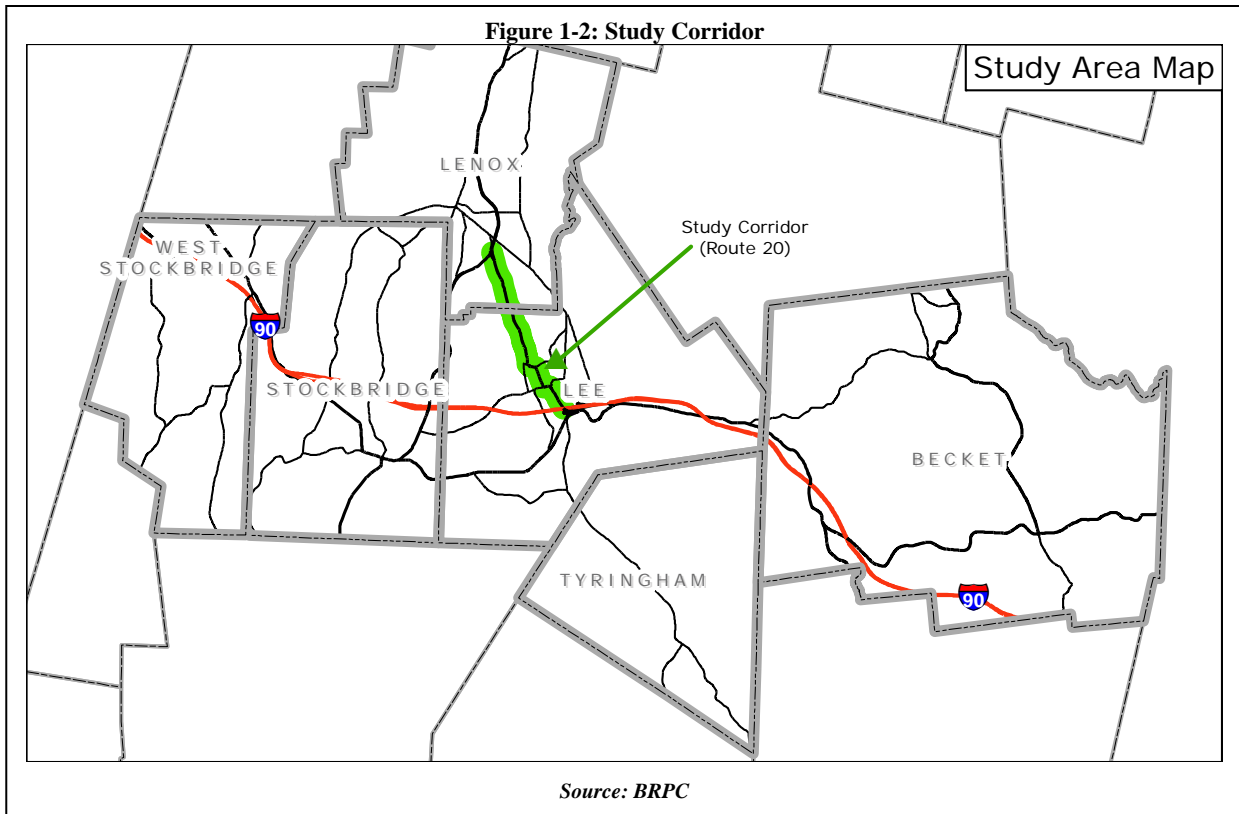
In 2003, as part of the development of the 2003 Regional Transportation Plan, the select boards from Lee, Lenox and Stockbridge jointly requested the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC) explore ways to help mitigate traffic congestion in downtown Lee. This request stressed “. . . the importance of solving Lee’s through traffic problems as part of a parkway solution.” The three select boards indicated that they believed “Berkshire County needs a true north/south limited access parkway to best meet the long term needs of the area.” They went on to indicate that they believed that “. . . the best location for a north/south parkway lies in the eastern area of the county.” Additional public input on the 2003 Regional Transportation Plan included comments from the Becket Board of Selectmen, who strongly opposed new road locations in that town (which lies in the eastern portion of the County along the Mass Turnpike).

In acknowledgement of the three select boards’ request, and recognizing that a focused analysis of transportation alternatives for the Lee area had never been conducted, the Berkshire MPO authorized initiation of this study as a work element in the 2005 Unified Planning Work Program. Data collection for the Lee Area Traffic Study began in 2006. The technical analysis and public involvement process was conducted from 2007 through early 2009.

This report summarizes BRPC’s analysis and presents recommendations directed both toward improving regional mobility and reducing traffic congestion in downtown Lee.

The study area included the towns of Lee, Lenox, Becket, Stockbridge and West Stockbridge. The study corridor was defined as Route 20 from the Lee/Lenox town lines to the Prime Outlets in Lee. Figure 1-1 and Figure 1-2 show the study area and the study corridor respectively.





The Town of Lee serves as the gateway community to the Massachusetts Turnpike (I-90) in Berkshire County. State Route 20 connects to I-90 in Lee, and is the primary route for regional traffic going through Lee to destinations in central and northern Berkshire County. It will continue to serve in this capacity for the foreseeable future. In addition, Route 20 to I-90 is used by approximately one third of all Berkshire County traffic that has travel origins or destinations outside the County.

The importance of Route 20 as a regional roadway is strongly linked to the connection it provides to I-90. Outside of Berkshire County, I-90 leads west to Albany, NY and east to Boston. I-90 is the only continuous east-west limited access road in Massachusetts. While there are other east-west routes in the state, in comparison to I-90 they offer substantially longer travel times.

To access I-90 in Berkshire County, motorists can utilize two interchanges. Exit 1, located in West Stockbridge, is a half-interchange, only serving traffic Turnpike traffic that has an eastern orientation. Exit 2 in Lee is a full interchange, providing Turnpike access for both easterly and westerly traffic, though it primarily serves traffic with an easterly orientation. Exit 2 is also located in the more densely populated central valley of Berkshire County. With I-90 serving as the best available route for a large component of external traffic, and with Exit 2 serving as the primary access point to I-90, it comes as no surprise that Route 20 in downtown Lee experiences traffic congestion.

Besides being the main link to I-90, Route 20 is also the only major arterial route in downtown Lee. Main Street (Route 20) is a compactly developed downtown street with on-street parking and numerous cross walks. Development along Park Street (Route 20) and Housatonic Street (Route 20) is characterized by a mixture of retail stores, restaurants, motels, gasoline/convenience stores and residences. These commercial developments are major traffic generators and attractors. Several mills throughout Lee have closed in recent years. These mill sites are in planning stages for redevelopment, and have the potential to contribute significant additional traffic to the downtown core.

Lee's status as an employment center and a consumer destination contributes to Route 20 traffic congestion as the mix of local and through traffic converges on downtown streets. Traffic congestion worsens during the summer months due to the significant influx of seasonal/tourist traffic that occurs throughout southern Berkshire County.

Truck traffic in downtown Lee is a major public concern. This was made evident during a November 2007 public meeting for Lee Area Traffic Study. The large numbers of trucks on downtown streets provide noticeable evidence of Lee's being the 'funnel point' for traffic accessing I-90. Truck navigation through the downtown is made more difficult by the need to negotiate three right angle turns along Route 20.



Main St @ Park St

Traffic by itself is not necessarily a detriment to Lee. In fact, the traffic generated by seasonal residents and visitors is indicative of the strong tourism component of our regional economy. However, increased traffic congestion is seen by many as a contributing factor to diminishing quality of life. Congestion on main roadways leads drivers to seek alternative routes via local streets and residential neighborhoods. Local and State officials recognize that traffic congestion and the lack of efficient access to I-90 can act as a constraint to economic growth in Lee and Central Berkshire County. Traffic congestion in Lee and resulting impaired regional mobility have been identified as issues in the several previous studies, including the Berkshire Regional Transportation Plan (2003/2007) and in the MassDOT funded North Central Berkshire Access Study (2001).

Over the years, a variety of options to reduce traffic congestion in Lee have been identified, but never fully analyzed. BRPC and MassDOT have long understood that reducing traffic congestion in downtown Lee has the potential to benefit all the communities of Berkshire County that depend on access to I-90. Recognizing that traffic congestion in downtown Lee represents a problem of regional significance, BRPC staff initiated the Lee Area Traffic Study to attempt to identify the most viable solutions to this long standing problem.

In defining the methodology for this study, BRPC staff divided the study into two components.

1. Traffic Study Component: This component included an inventory of the roadway system within the Study Area, and assessed traffic operations in downtown Lee, including the existing level of service (LOS).

2. Alternatives Analysis Component: In order to assess the optimum means available to improve traffic conditions, this analysis identified a wide range of transportation alternatives (both internal and external to downtown Lee), and evaluated their



Rte 20/102 & Mass Turnpike (I-90)

performance and impacts.

The Lee Area Traffic Study had the following objectives:

1. Improve regional mobility and/or access to I-90 for motorists currently driving through the Town of Lee with destinations outside of Lee, and
2. Improve the quality of life, mobility, and safety for motorists and pedestrians alike within Lee.

While the focus of this study was transportation, the analysis also considered social and natural environmental elements within the study area.

This study used existing data from previous work, such as the:

- Berkshire 2003/2007 Regional Transportation Plans;
- North Central Berkshire Access Study/MIS (2001);
- Berkshire Origin/Destination Survey (2003); and
- Corridor access management techniques, including those documented in the Berkshire Access Management Guidelines (2002).



Main St @ Eaton St



Downtown Lee



PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS

BRPC staff conducted an extensive public outreach effort for this study. This outreach included:

- A study Working Group comprised of town officials appointed by town Select Boards from Lee, Lenox, Becket, Stockbridge, and West Stockbridge; MassDOT staff; BRPC staff; and representatives from the Berkshire Chamber of Commerce and the Berkshire Natural Resources Council. The Working Group met eleven times from April 2007 - December 2008. This group provided input and technical support throughout all phases of the study and endorsed the elimination of various alternatives at each step of the alternatives evaluation process.
- Three Public Meetings were held during the course of the study. The first public meeting was held in November 2007 to obtain input from the public on problems and possible solutions. At this meeting, the existing and forecast year 2030 traffic conditions were presented. The initial screening analysis of alternatives was presented at the second public meeting in August 2008, and the preferred alternatives and preliminary Study recommendations were presented at the final meeting in January 2009.
- BRPC staff also presented existing and projected traffic conditions and preliminary study recommendations at the Towns of Lee and Stockbridge Select Boards' meetings.

Appendix B summarizes the public participation process in detail. This information includes:

- **WORKING GROUP MEETINGS**
 - Agendas (11 Working Group meetings)
 - Meeting Summaries(11 Working Group meetings)
- **PUBLIC MEETINGS**
 - Agendas (Three Public meetings)
 - Power Point Presentation(Three Public Meetings)
 - Meeting Summaries(Three Public Meetings)
- **SELECTBOARD MEETINGS**
 - Lee Selectboard Meeting Summary (two separate meetings)
 - Stockbridge Selectboard Meeting Summary
- **TEAR SHEETS OF THE ARTICLES RELATED TO THE STUDY FROM THE NEWSPAPERS**