

# Aht'Wy Plaza

Development and highway improvements

Feb. 2019



## PREPARING FOR CHANGE

Aht'Wy Plaza is an area with a history of mixed land use of both residential and business development. The Nez Perce Tribe (NPT) planned, built and opened new business establishments around 1996 that increased the volume of traffic to that specific area.

At the request of the Idaho Transportation Department (ITD), NPT conducted a traffic impact study in 1997 to explore how its private development and plans for expansion would affect movements on US- 12/US-95 and identify any necessary improvements, such as an interchange, to address any impacts.

NPT delivered initial results in 1998, which identified the need for phased improvements, followed by an interchange, to provide safer access and avoid excessive delays. As discussed at one of the first meetings, ITD recommended that development of the plaza should remain compatible with an interchange.

## WORKING TOWARD IMPROVED SAFETY

In January 2001, ITD and NPT agreed to a specific timeline to construct phased improvements. Phase 1 would be constructed by late December 2001, and Phase 2 would be constructed by late December 2005. Other work, including the completion of another traffic impact study, would also be finished with Phase 2.

Phase 1 looked to install highway lighting, construct a westbound acceleration lane for the east entrance and build right turn lanes into both entrances. Phase 2 would extend the eastbound left turn lane for drivers on the highway and also construct a westbound acceleration lane at the west entrance. The tribe would oversee design and construction of the phases.

NPT completed Phase 1 in fall 2002. Because the acceleration lane for Phase 2 would require expansion of the highway into a large rock slope, in 2004 the tribe requested that the highway median be reduced to allow for an acceleration lane. Reducing the median would lessen construction costs but would require expansion of the bridge over Hatwai Creek. Given the total costs of realignment, ITD and NPT decided to focus on development of the interchange to offer the safest access and allow for more development of the plaza. It would be designed for the east entrance to avoid adjacent property owners, environmental issues and cultural concerns at the west entrance.

Phase 2 evolved into construction of an interchange at the east entrance, and in 2006, the Nez Perce Tribal Executive Committee passed a resolution to aggressively pursue it. Design and construction was set to be completed by late December 2008.

ITD proposed a new agreement in 2007 to design the interchange in-house if NPT would contribute construction funds. The agreement was not signed.

Design continued as a tribal advisory group explored options. A public meeting was held in July 2009, shortly followed by selection of the current proposed design. ITD reviewed the design, and the tribe provided other agencies the opportunity to comment before hiring a consultant in February 2010 to proceed with design of the proposed alternative.

For the next five years, NPT worked with the Army Corps of Engineers and the Idaho Fish and Game Department to address concerns that the interchange's design would affect a nearby wetland mitigation site.

As discussions over environmental mitigations eventually stalled progress, in 2017 ITD and NPT elected to condense the design to fit onto existing right of way. This would avoid environmental impacts, allowing final design to once again continue.

In summer 2017, ITD and NPT partnered to install a concrete island at the west entrance to limit left turns on the highway. ITD designed the concrete island, which was constructed with funding from the tribe. New signs were also placed months later to warn drivers exiting the plaza of approaching traffic on the highway. Unlike other signage in the area, these flash when vehicles on the highway are detected.

After two drivers died in separate crashes leaving the plaza in late 2018, ITD joined several law enforcement agencies on patrol and facilitated a road safety audit with other transportation experts.

A road safety audit includes a thorough examination of an area by an independent team to help identify safety solutions. The team met in January 2019 and provided a final report in February, which included a range of options that could be constructed in advance of the planned interchange. Both NPT and ITD are moving forward with options for the east entrance, which include adding an acceleration lane for eastbound traffic and widening the westbound right turn lane to create separation between turning and thru traffic. Work on these interim improvements could begin in spring when weather conditions allow quality paving.

## LOOKING AHEAD

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NPT hired a consultant in December 2018 to finalize design of the interchange. Design will be completed next winter, with construction dependent on funding options.

Created in conjunction with the Idaho Transportation Department.

