



Cahaba  
River  
Society

## BRIEFING PAPER: CAHABA BEACH ROAD PROJECT

September 2015

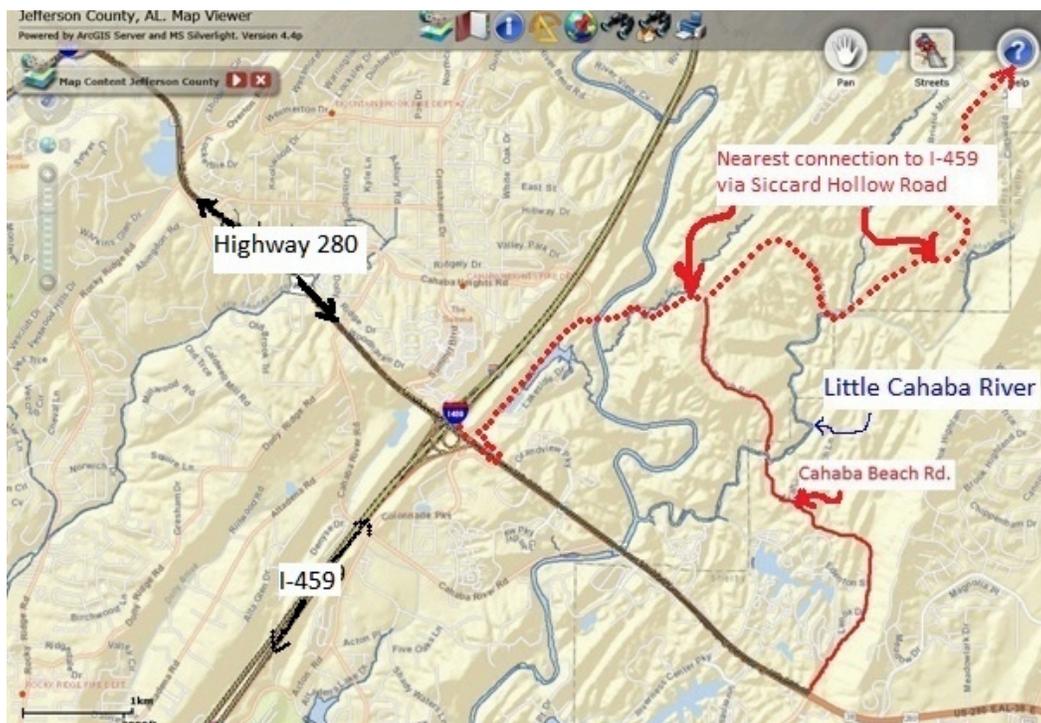
**SUMMARY:** Cahaba Beach Road (CBR) is a narrow partly dirt, partly paved road with a closed 1-lane iron bridge across the Little Cahaba River.

Shelby County proposes that CBR should be realigned and widened, with a new bridge, as a Highway 280 reliever route from Valleydale Rd. to Sicard Hollow Rd. From that point, there are narrow, winding roads connecting to I-459, Cahaba Heights, and 280, but to date the proposal does not address any improvements that would be needed to those roads.

The new CBR would bring heavy traffic through Birmingham Water Works property and private forested lands protecting the Little Cahaba River, which conveys raw drinking water from Lake Purdy to the intakes in the River, and would draw intensive growth to undeveloped lands around the Little Cahaba.

ALDOT is directing an Environmental Assessment (EA) for alternative alignments. Construction has been designated for state ATRIP funding, a program that borrows against future federal transportation funding. The stated project purpose is to “improve connectivity of the road network.” Shelby County Roads Dept. has attempted this project several times for over 15 years. There has been substantial public opposition each time.

**PROJECT LOCATION:** (Map provided by CRS on Jefferson County base map). The current location of CBR is shown. ALDOT has not yet released potential alignments. About half of the surrounding land is undeveloped and owned by the BWWB. The rest is largely forested, with large natural lots and private homes.



**PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW:** CRS is deeply concerned about potential impacts to the region's drinking water, habitat for federally-listed aquatic species, and the most healthy remaining large tributary in the upper watershed. Many Little Cahaba neighbors are once again opposed to the project. In August 2015, CRS, partner groups, and citizens sent **letters to ALDOT, FHWA, and Shelby Co.** listing issues that should trigger a full Environmental Impact Statement process in order to meet federal NEPA law, instead of the limited EA study now underway.

We believe an EA and Finding of No Significant Impact would ignore NEPA requirements and would not provide sufficient information for making wise decisions.

CRS and partner groups asked ALDOT to hold a public meeting on the project, which had not previously occurred despite alignment surveying activity by the County and ALDOT's designation of ATRIP funds for construction. We appreciated ALDOT's willingness to hold an informal public meeting on June 16, 2015, and we asked last summer that an ongoing stakeholder group be created. Most people attending the meeting raised concerns about the project. The letters and meeting were part of an effort to ensure that ALDOT/FHWA are aware of the large amount of public controversy and full range of potential environmental impacts that must be studied in an EIS process. CRS and others sent similar comment letters about the ALDOT draft 5-year State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP). The CBR project is included in the draft STIP.

#### **ISSUES OF CONCERN:**

***Drinking Water/water quality:*** Any road of a size and alignment to carry more than local traffic would open access and development pressure around the BWWB lands that protect the drinking water source. Increased sedimentation from road/bridge construction and spin-off development will result in negative impacts to quality of the drinking water source, the Little Cahaba, and the area covered under ADEM's plan that sets a Clean Water Act goal to reduce Cahaba sediment pollution by 48%. The long-term urban runoff from roads and development will add pollutants and will cause instream erosion of the Little Cahaba.

***Endangered species:*** The federally-listed Fine-lined pocketbook and Triangular kidneyshell mussels are located in the Little Cahaba around the potential bridge/road construction site.

***Land and stream conservation:*** This is one of the few remaining natural/healthy open space areas around the upper Cahaba River and up to now has been the most protected tributary with a healthy community of freshwater life.

***Education:*** The current closed Cahaba Beach Road and bridge is the main CRS CLEAN program access for the Upper Cahaba. The Little Cahaba is an important site for outdoor environmental education for the region's youth.

***Local opposition:*** Many area property owners strongly oppose this project and have invested over the years with an aim to permanently protect lands around the Little Cahaba River.