



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.

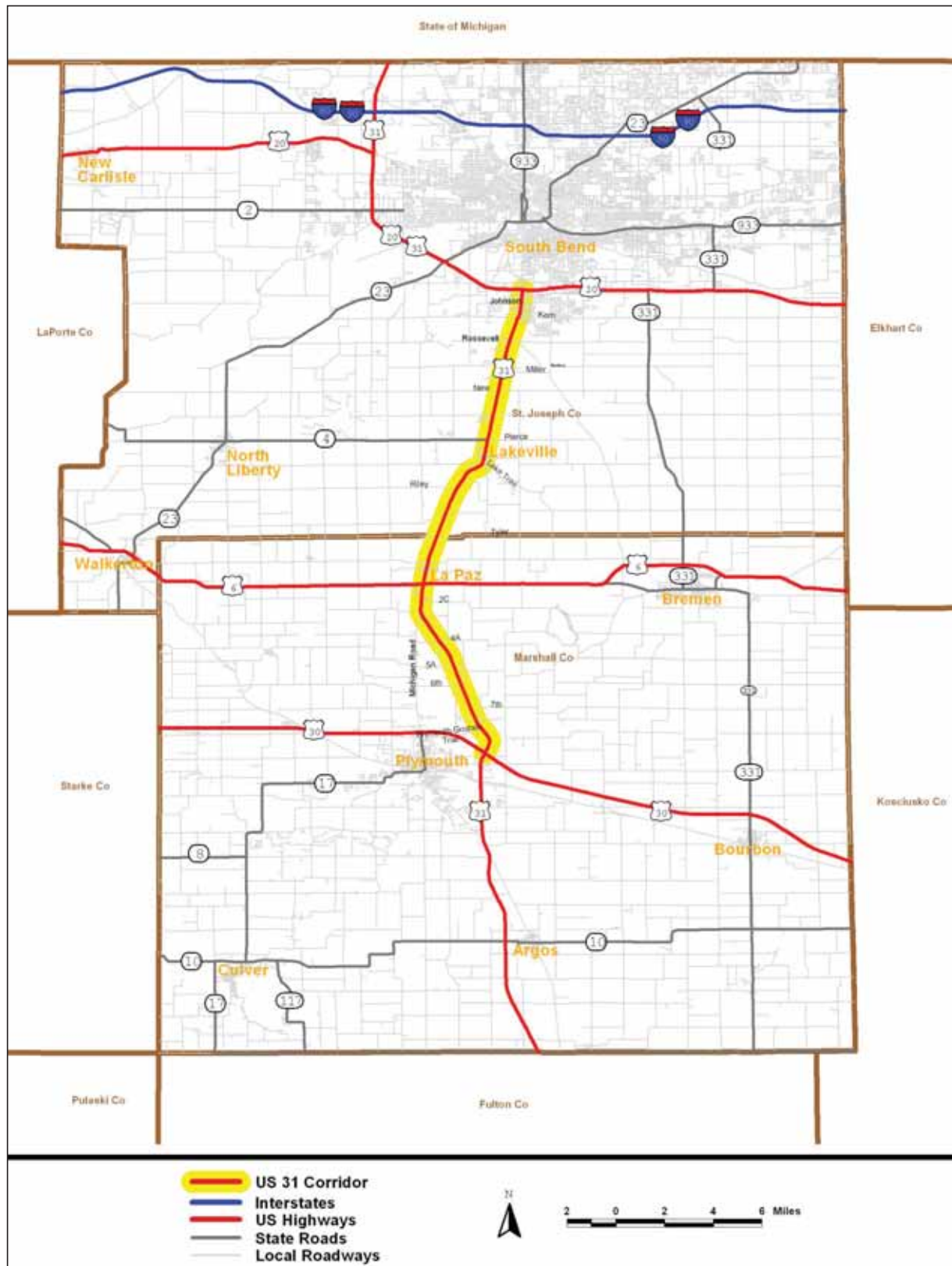


Figure 1.1.1: US 31 Regional Map



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.

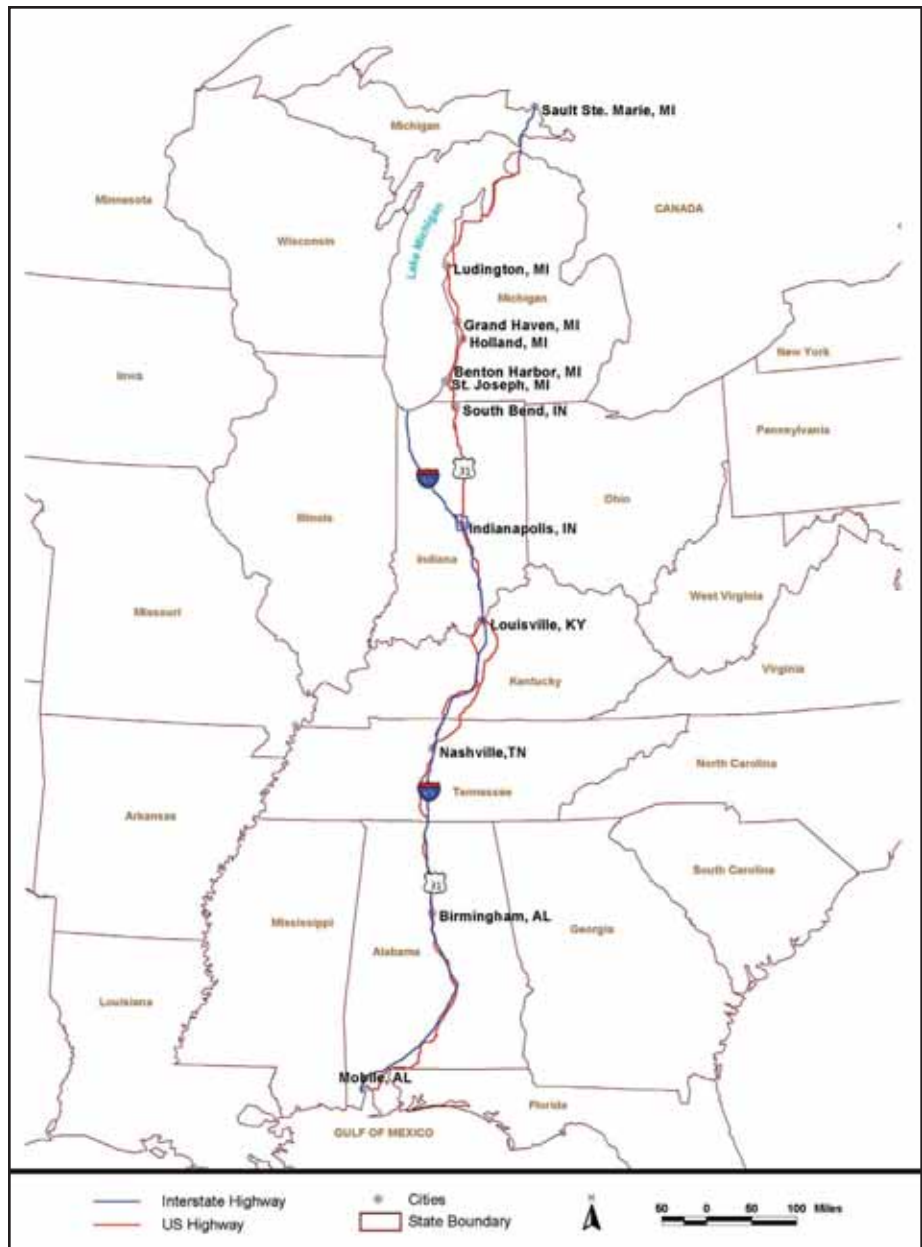
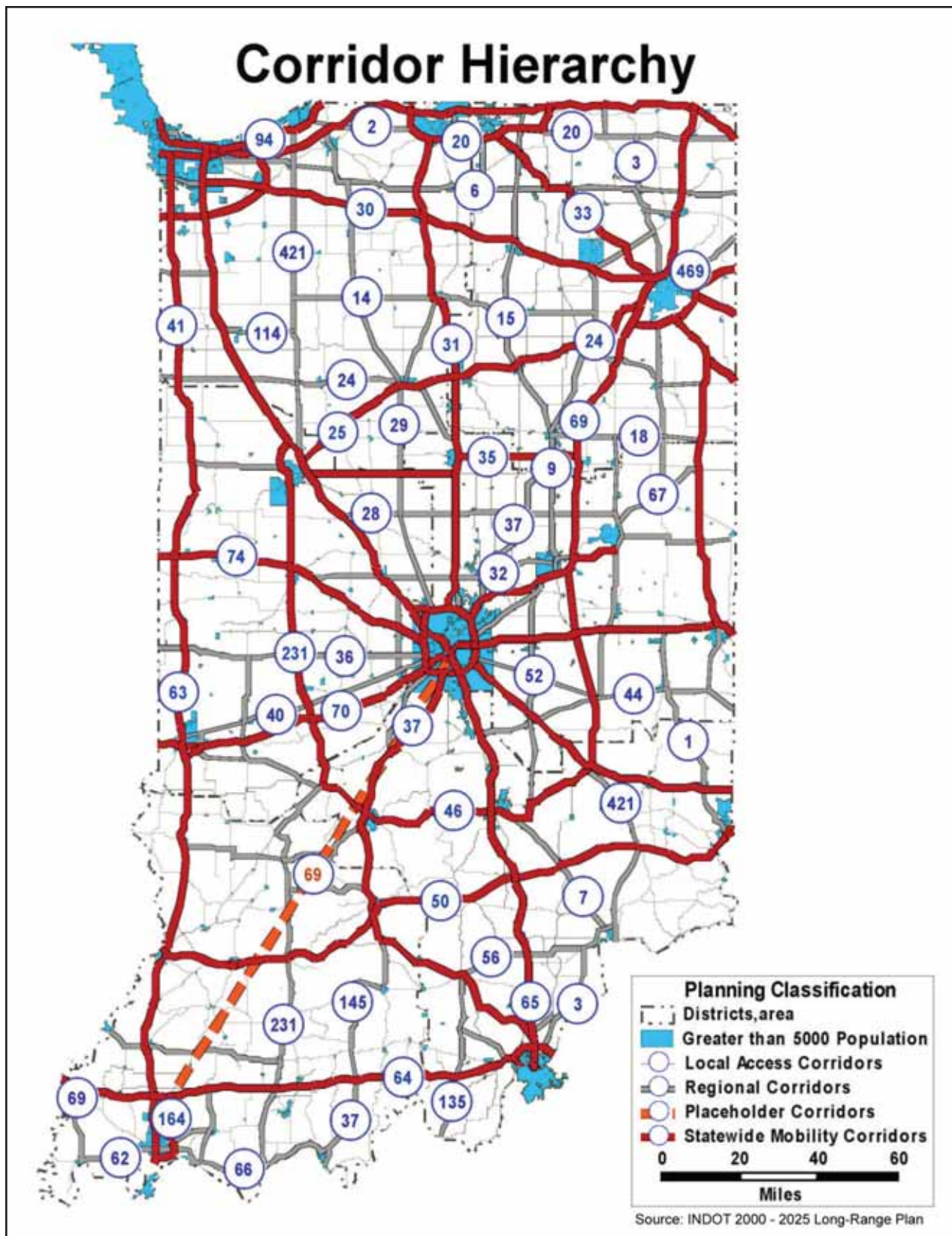


Figure 1.1.3: US National Map

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