

US 93 POLSON-SOMERS CORRIDOR STUDY

TRIBAL, AGENCY, AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT PLAN

Technical Memorandum

August 21, 2024



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1.0. INTRODUCTION

The Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) is developing a corridor study of US Highway 93 (US 93) between Polson and Somers, Montana. The purpose of the *US 93 Polson-Somers Corridor Study* is to develop a comprehensive long-range plan for managing the corridor and determining what improvements can be made to address identified needs while considering public and agency input, environmental constraints, access management, and financial feasibility. The study will be a collaborative process with MDT, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT), local jurisdictions, resource agencies, and the public to identify transportation needs and potential solutions. An initial step in the transportation planning process is to develop a *Tribal, Agency, and Public Involvement Plan* (IP) to guide involvement opportunities throughout the planning process.

The corridor study process encourages early communication with interested parties to help identify needs, constraints, and opportunities and determine reasonable improvements given available resources and local support. Tribal, community, stakeholder, agency, and other interested party involvement are important components in any successful planning process. The IP identifies multiple strategies to encourage meaningful participation and engagement and aligns with MDT's established processes as outlined in its *Public Involvement Plan*¹.

1.1. Purpose of the IP

The purpose of this IP is to guide the implementation of strategies providing ongoing opportunities for involvement by the public, stakeholders, and Tribal and agency representatives throughout the corridor study process. Education and outreach are essential elements in the study process. Providing complete information, timely notices, and ample opportunities to comment, as well as ensuring full access to key decisions, will help achieve MDT's public involvement goals. The methods described in this IP are not intended to restrict consideration or use of other methods to encourage Tribal, agency and public participation. Early and continuous involvement in all major actions and decisions is paramount to the success of the planning process.

1.2. Study Area

The study area includes US 93 starting north of Polson at reference point (RP) 63.0 and ending north of Somers at RP 104.2. US 93 is a National Highway System route that is important to the local, State, and Federal transportation system. The Polson to Somers corridor spans Lake and Flathead Counties, crosses the Flathead Reservation, and passes through many small and medium-sized communities including Polson, Big Arm, Elmo, Dayton, Rollins, Lakeside, and Somers. The scenic corridor is rich in natural and cultural resources and follows the western shore of Flathead Lake. The study area boundary is illustrated in **Figure 1**.

¹ Montana Department of Transportation, *Public Involvement Plan*, available at: <https://www.mdt.mt.gov/publications/docs/manuals/pubinvhb.pdf>

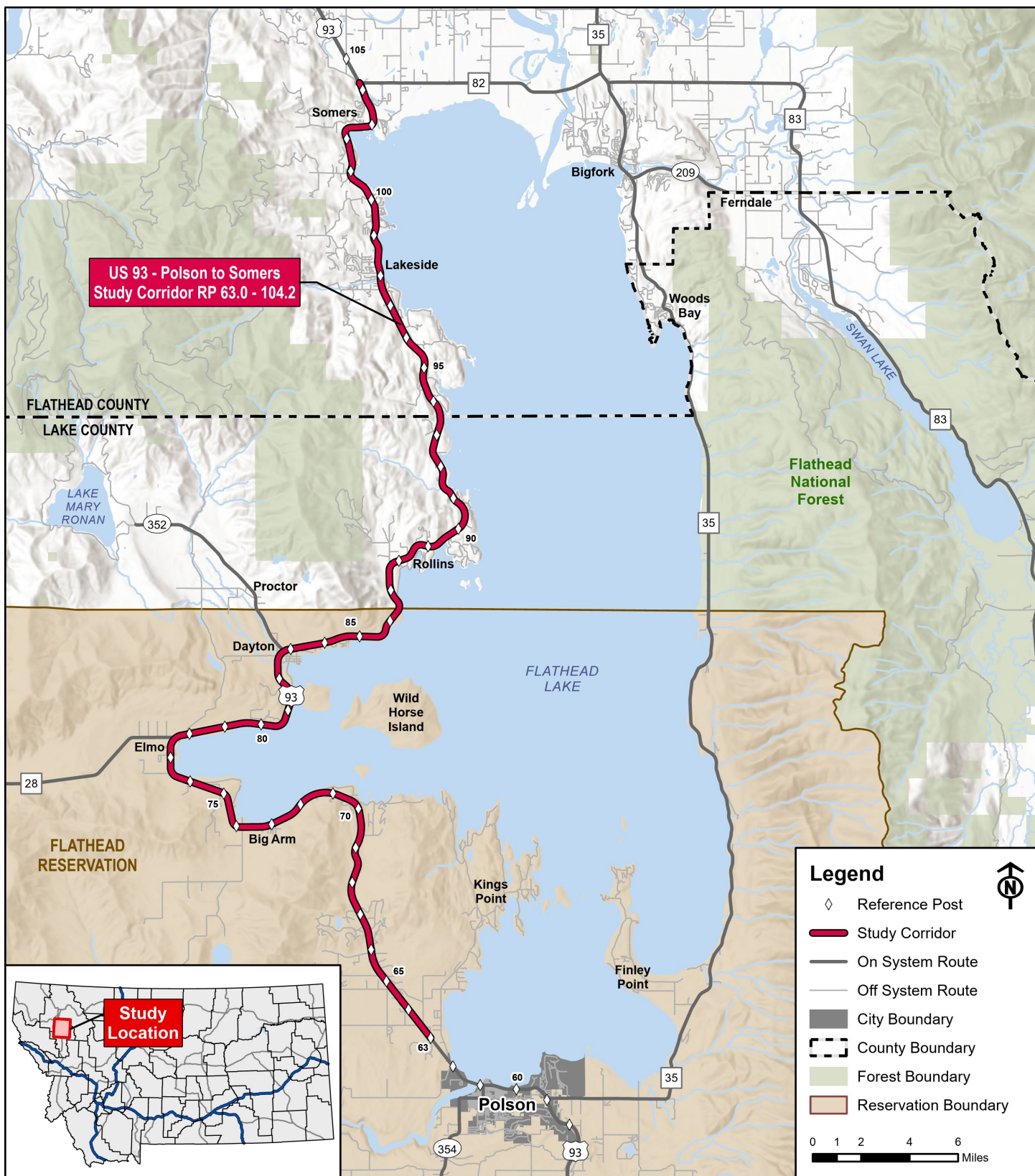


Figure 1: Study Area

2.0. AUDIENCES

Active participation and input will be encouraged at every stage of the planning process. Key audiences that will be involved in this process include both internal and external stakeholders. Internal stakeholders are involved in the planning process and are tasked with making decisions both through the planning process and through future project implementation. External stakeholders include everyone with interest or expertise related to the study corridor.

2.1. Plan Contacts

Contact information for the MDT and Consultant project managers will be provided in all information that is published. This information is provided below:

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2.2. Advisory Committee

An advisory committee (AC) will be established to guide the study process and review deliverables produced by the consultant team. Approximately ten (10) AC meetings will be scheduled over the 15-month study period in coordination with planned deliverables. Meetings will track progress and address study development issues and questions. The meetings are important for the exchange of technical information and ideas during the development of the study.

During these meetings, the consultant will make regular presentations covering the current work effort and the AC will identify and discuss any issues or concerns. Meetings will provide the planning team with essential feedback and guidance and will also provide the AC with opportunities to guide the development of the corridor study. Anticipated discussion topics are listed below.

- **AC Meeting 1:** Kickoff, Work Plan, *Involvement Plan*, Study Schedule
- **AC Meeting 2:** Resource Agency Meeting Preparation, *Environmental Scan*
- **AC Meeting 3:** Resource Agency Meeting Summary, *Draft Existing and Projected Conditions Memo*
- **AC Meeting 4:** Outreach #1 Summary, *Draft Needs and Objectives Memo*
- **AC Meeting 5:** Initial Improvement Options
- **AC Meeting 6:** *Draft Improvement Options Memo*, Outreach #2 Preparation
- **AC Meeting 7:** Outreach #2 Summary, *Draft Corridor Study Report*, Public Review Period
- **AC Meeting 8:** Public Comments, *Final Corridor Study Report*
- **AC Meeting 9:** Access Management Findings/Recommendations
- **AC Meeting 10:** *Access Management Plan*

2.3. Tribal Council and Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO)

The CSKT are governed by an elected Tribal Council and Tribal Chairperson. The Council is comprised of 10 members representing 8 districts of the Flathead Reservation. Each member is elected for a four-year staggered term. The Chair serves as the Chief Executive Officer of the Tribes. MDT regularly meets with the Tribal Council to discuss transportation matters and ongoing projects within the Flathead Reservation. Additionally, MDT's historians and archaeologists regularly coordinate with the THPO on Tribal and cultural resource matters. The planning process will build upon these longstanding relationships between MDT, the CSKT Tribal Council, and the CSKT THPO to facilitate productive discussions and build support for the corridor study.

2.4. Resource Agencies

The planning team will coordinate with study team members, the AC, and MDT to develop a list of key resource agency contacts for this study. Involvement is anticipated from State, Federal and Tribal agencies such as the Montana Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP), United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the CSKT THPO, and CSKT Natural Resources Department (NRD). Agencies will be asked to help confirm resources within the study corridor, define mitigation requirements, and identify opportunities to avoid or offset potential project impacts.

2.5. Other Stakeholders

Input from a diverse range of stakeholders is important to the planning process. Areas of concern will be identified through stakeholder outreach and may include safety, traffic operations, property access, wildlife, and cultural concerns. Specific stakeholder representatives will be identified in coordination with study team members, the AC, and MDT. Stakeholders may include Tribal community members and residents, Tribal and County government entities, law enforcement and emergency service providers, schools, local business owners, adjacent landowners, wildlife and conservation organizations, trucking and freight representatives, utilities, recreational groups, and other interested and knowledgeable individuals. Potential stakeholders include:

- Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes
- Lake County
- Flathead County
- City of Polson
- Polson Rural Fire District
- Big Arm Fire Department
- Lakeside Quick Response Unit
- Polson Police Department
- Montana Highway Patrol
- Montana Trucking Association
- Polson Airport
- Polson School District 23
- Somers-Lakeside School District 29
- Polson Chamber of Commerce
- Lakeside-Somers Chamber of Commerce
- Upper West Shore Alliance
- Flathead Lakers
- Flathead Lake Biological Station
- Lake County Conservation District
- Western Montana Area VI Agency on Aging
- Summit Independent Living
- Flathead County Economic Development Authority
- Adjacent landowners and businesses
- Recreational organizations and guides
- Others as identified or requested

2.6. Public

Members of the public have a vested interest in safe and efficient travel on Montana's public roadways. To address public concerns, comments and input will be collected and considered throughout the planning process. An official comment period will be provided after the release of the draft report. Additionally, all comments and concerns received at meetings and through individual discussions will be considered by the AC throughout the planning process and will help establish critical areas of concern and consideration.

3.0. STRATEGIES AND TOOLS

Engagement strategies are intended to share information about the planning process, offer opportunities for dialogue, identify known barriers and constraints within the corridor, and obtain meaningful input by reaching a diverse cross section of interests. Individual strategies and outreach tools are discussed below.

3.1. Study Website

A study website will be used to encourage public interaction and to provide study information. The website will be hosted by MDT and updated as needed throughout the study process. Informational material will be posted to the website including contact information, meeting announcements, frequently asked questions (FAQs) about the corridor study process, a description of the study, and study documents.

To supplement MDT's traditional online commenting system, MDT will also offer an interactive map platform allowing the public to provide feedback on the performance of the existing transportation corridor. Visitors to the platform will be able to leave comments tagged to specific locations noting their concerns and feedback.

3.2. Public Informational Meetings

Public informational meetings will take place at two key points during the planning study. The first informational meeting will occur after initial existing and projected conditions have been evaluated for the study area. The purpose of this meeting will be to present the corridor study process, explain how to become and stay involved, and discuss preliminary issues and concerns within the study area. The meeting will allow members of the public to provide information about existing and projected conditions and share input for developing the needs and objectives for the corridor.

The second informational meeting will occur after initial recommendations are identified. The purpose will be to present options considered and discuss preliminary recommendations. Members of the public will be invited to provide feedback on improvement options and preliminary recommendations.

For each set of informational meetings, in-person open houses will be provided in two separate locations to better serve the communities along the corridor and to encourage greater participation from roadway users and residents. The open houses will be held in the southern and northern portions of the corridor (potentially in Polson, Somers, Elmo, Lakeside, and/or Kalispell). In addition to the in-person meetings, MDT will host virtual meetings using an online platform (such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams). The virtual meetings will consist of a brief presentation followed by an open question and answer period. Display materials from the in-person meetings and

recordings of the virtual meetings will be posted to the website for those unable to attend the live events.

Meeting announcements will be developed and advertised 15 business days prior to informational meetings. The ads will announce meeting locations, times, and dates; the format and purpose of the meetings; and the locations where documents may be reviewed (if applicable). The *Lake County Leader*, *Flathead Beacon*, *Valley Journal*, *Daily Inter Lake*, and *Char-Koosta News* may carry display ads announcing the meeting details. Meetings may also be announced on local radio and/or television stations, by email to the study contact list, and by mail to adjacent landowners.

A newsletter/flyer will be developed before each set of informational meetings. The newsletters will describe work in progress, preliminary findings and recommendations, and other relevant topics. The newsletter will be posted to the study website, emailed to the study contact list, and provided to AC members and select stakeholders for distribution to their constituents and posting to their respective websites. Printed copies of newsletters will be available at the informational meetings.

3.3. CSKT Tribal Council Presentations

Keeping the CSKT Tribal Council apprised will be important to secure support for study findings and recommendations. Initially, MDT will introduce the study to the CSKT Tribal Council at a regularly scheduled meeting attended by the MDT Missoula District. Additionally, the study team will provide two (2) presentations to the CSKT Tribal Council coinciding with the timing of public informational meetings. The first presentation will be used to discuss the purpose of the study and initial findings from the existing and projected conditions evaluation. The second presentation will present improvement options and initial study recommendations. These presentations will be important to facilitate government-to-government communication between MDT and the CSKT.

3.4. THPO/Culture Committee Coordination

As the planning team conducts research to confirm cultural resources within the study corridor, coordination with the THPO, Salish-Pend d'Oreille, and Kootenai Culture Committees will be important to understand important Tribal cultural and historic resources and communicate the study process. Government-to-government coordination will occur between MDT and the CSKT THPO and Culture Committees, as appropriate over the course of the study, which may involve a formal letter and/or virtual meeting.

3.5. Resource Agency Meeting

A virtual resource agency meeting will be held to present the findings of the draft *Environmental Scan* as well as the initial findings of the *Existing and Projected Conditions Report*. The resource agencies will be asked to help identify initial avoidance areas, mitigation needs, and opportunities. To ensure maximum participation, a scheduling poll will be emailed to resource agency contacts to identify the meeting date and time. Heightened agency interest is anticipated given the sensitive resources in the US 93 corridor, the level of known wildlife activity, and the ongoing Tribal, State, and Federal collaboration and involvement throughout the broader US 93 corridor.

3.6. Stakeholder Outreach

To improve engagement and gain valuable information, the study team will target key stakeholder groups that are familiar with land uses, resources, and transportation needs in the corridor. During the information-gathering phase of the study, the planning team will reach out to select stakeholders to schedule up to ten (10) virtual meetings with interested parties. The purpose of these conversations will be collaborative and interactive to identify issues and concerns within the corridor. The information gathered from the conversations will help the study team fill potential data gaps and identify areas for special consideration throughout the planning process. Additionally, the study team will send electronic study updates and announcements to the full stakeholder list identified in coordination with MDT and the AC to encourage broad stakeholder participation in the planning process.

3.7. Tribal, Agency, and Public Review Period

The planning team will facilitate a Tribal, agency, and public review period for the draft *US 93 Polson to Somers Corridor Study* to obtain input and feedback. This will be an important opportunity to demonstrate how the study incorporates background research and considers Tribal, resource agency, and public input received to arrive at the study findings and determinations. Targeted emails will announce availability of the draft study, within specific focus on identified stakeholders and resource agencies to request their review and comment on the draft study.

3.8. Access Management Notification

As part of the access management planning process for the corridor, letters will be mailed to all adjacent property owners. Flathead County, Lake County, and CSKT representatives will be informed of the access management process during AC meetings, and a separate letter will be mailed to the Flathead County Commissioners, Lake County Commissioners, and CSKT Tribal Council. These notifications will serve to explain the access management planning process and how individuals and local jurisdictions may be affected.

4.0. ACCESS AND VISIBILITY

The planning team will be available to all interested parties for the purposes of receiving comments and answering questions. All information published regarding the corridor study will provide contact information for the project managers. Comments can be submitted throughout the planning process via the website, in writing, by phone, or by email.

4.1. Information Availability

Technical and planning-level information related to the data used in the development of the study will be available in memoranda, mapping, graphics, and other formats. The materials will be made available on the study website.

4.2. Consideration of Public Input

Input and comments from stakeholders and the public will be considered by the AC throughout the planning process. Public comments received on the draft report will be documented and included as an appendix in the final report.

4.3. Equity Considerations/Traditionally Underserved Populations

Additional efforts are necessary to equitably involve traditionally underserved segments of the population, including disabled, elderly, minority, and low-income individuals, with specific focus on CSKT Tribal members and Flathead Reservation residents. The following steps will help with these efforts.

- **Provide appropriate accommodations:** Appropriate non-discrimination statements and alternative accommodation contacts will be provided on all printed materials. Accessibility accommodations will be offered for all public outreach activities, including virtual meetings. Upon request, alternative participation methods and materials will be made available.
- **Seek help from community leaders and organizations:** To facilitate meaningful involvement with traditionally underserved populations, consultation with Tribal community leaders will be conducted to determine the most effective times, methods, and locations to reach the Tribal community population.
- **Be sensitive to diverse audiences:** At meetings and in printed materials, the study team will attempt to communicate clearly and understandably and be sensitive to Tribal cultural concerns. Printed materials will be developed using easy-to-understand language.

5.0. OUTREACH SUMMARY AND SCHEDULE

This plan establishes guidelines and procedures for encouraging Tribal, agency, and public participation. The following strategies will be used to share information and seek input.

- A study website will be developed to share information about the planning process and to publish study materials.
- A mailing list will be developed to contact interested stakeholders and members of the public.
- Newsletters and media announcements will be developed in advance of public informational meetings.
- Two sets of public informational meetings will be held to learn about issues and concerns and to share study findings.
- Targeted outreach will occur with the Tribal Council, resource agencies, and stakeholders.
- Public comments and input will be collected and considered throughout the study.
- Published materials will be available in alternative formats and be sensitive to diverse audiences.

The anticipated schedule follows a 15-month time frame. A public draft of the *US 93 Polson-Somers Corridor Study* is anticipated by January 2025, with a draft *Access Management Plan* anticipated by April 2025. All work is anticipated to be completed by May 2025. **Figure 2** illustrates the anticipated schedule.

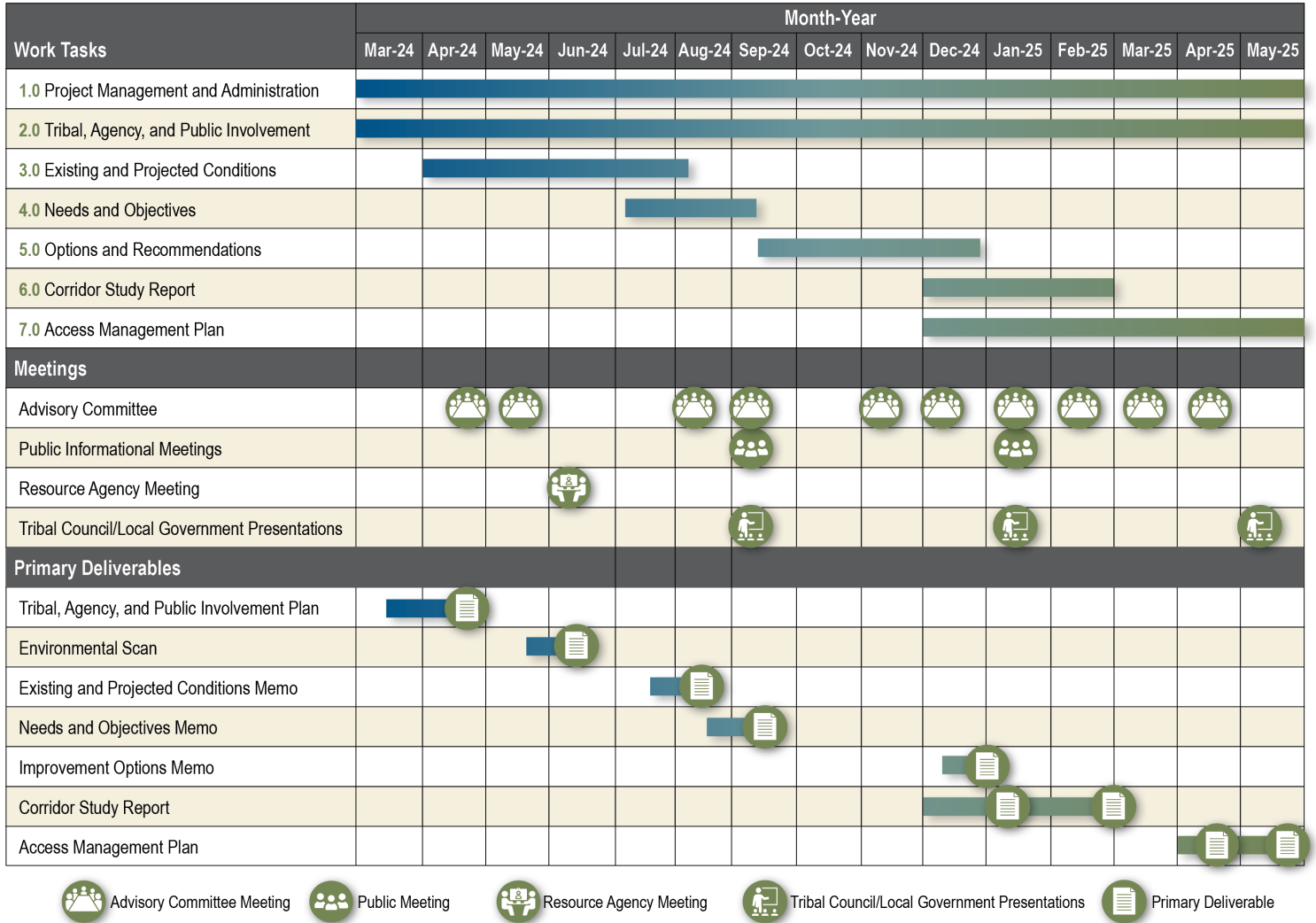


Figure 2: Anticipated Study Schedule

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