

# Bridging the Gap

*Meeting solicits public opinion about project to redo Weirs Beach span*

By ED PIERCE | Jun 24, 2015



Photo by: ED PIERCE/CITIZEN JOHN SARGENT, a state DOT bridge design engineer, answers a question about a planned project to rehabilitate the Route 3 bridge over the railroad tracks in Weis Beach at an informational meeting in Laconia on Tuesday night. The \$1.5 million project could start in 2020.



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**LACONIA** — The consensus among Weirs Beach business owners attending a New Hampshire Department of Transportation informational meeting Tuesday night in Laconia leaned toward closing the Route 3 bridge over the railroad for a month to make repairs to the dilapidated structure quickly.

According to Mark Richardson, the administrator of the DOT's Bureau of Bridge Design, the bridge was added to the state's "Red List" of failing bridges in 2009 and is currently ranked 40th on the 2015 Bridge Priority List in New Hampshire.

Richardson and a team of specialists reviewed for the public numerous problems associated with the project and outlined options to completing construction with the least amount of disruption for local commerce and motorists.

"We're looking at construction in 2020," Richardson said. "The funding for this is in our 10-year plans. We anticipate the same level of funding at that time and we believe it's a reasonable schedule for the project."

He said the public can be assured of the bridge's safety until construction starts on the \$1.5 million bridge rehabilitation project because being on the state's "Red List" means it is inspected more often to detect structural problems.

"The bridge has no weight restrictions, but we need to address this in a five-year period," Richardson said.

The bridge was originally built in the 1880s and rehabilitated in 1933. During the peak season of the year, it handles more than 13,000 cars per day.

The bridge's federal sufficiency rating is 32.7 percent, while its deck and superstructure ratings are listed as "poor."

John Sargent, a DOT bridge design engineer, said the project is complex and involves many considerations.

"It's narrow and a simple span," he said. "There are line-of-sight issues, many utilities in the area and in close proximity to multiple accesses of roadways and driveways. It's in a tourist area, deals with the railroad, would require a long detour of almost 18.3 miles if closed and there are high traffic volumes."

Sargent said the bridge's abutment concrete shows cracks and some reinforcing is evident upon visual inspection.

The availability of asphalt could dictate what time of the year the project could be accomplished as some asphalt providers close for the season in late fall and do not open again until early spring.

Because the railroad runs from May through November, a March or April start time might be the best time of year for the project before tourists arrive in the Lakes Region and Laconia Motorcycle Week in June.

Of the options for work presented to the public at the meeting, one would be a phased construction of 120 days that would reduce traffic to one alternating lane to allow for steel beams, a concrete deck and cast-in-place concrete slabs to be installed. Choosing that option also would add 25 percent to the bridge's potential construction cost.

The other option would be to close the bridge for 30 days and complete all of the project in that time with police, fire and emergency vehicles being re-routed on private property near the bridge for access, but all other traffic having to be detoured for 18.3 miles around the bridge construction.

"We would give a contractor a specific time to start construction and they would have a month to wrap it up," Richardson said. "We want them to open it as soon as possible."

The 30-day option with bridge closure would install pre-cast and pre-stressed voided slabs to reduce construction time.

Jennifer Riordan, an environmental/wetland scientist working on the project for CMA Consulting Engineers, said she is still reviewing natural resources in the area that could be affected by the construction.

"There is a small swale north of the railroad and a few invasive species present," she said. "There also may be some noise associated with the construction. Endicott Rock Park is north of the bridge and so work needs to comply with the National Historic Preservation Act."

Richardson said Tuesday evening's meeting was designed to share information about the project with the public and to gauge which options the public prefers.

At least six owners of Weirs Beach businesses expressed support for closing the bridge and doing the work in a 30-day period.

Upon completion of the planning process, Richardson said the DOT will meet with city councilors and recommend an option and course of action to them before putting the project out to bid sometime in the fall of 2019.