

New Castle-Rye Bridge Project
Summary of Meeting
Public Information Meeting
February 5, 2015
7:00 – 9:00 p.m.

The fourth Public Information Meeting for the New Castle-Rye Bridge Project was held on Thursday, February 5, 2015 in The Common (Recreation Center) in New Castle, NH. Approximately 40 members of the public attended. Jill Barrett, a member of the HDR Consultant Team, opened and moderated the meeting. A presentation on the status of the project and the two alternatives that have recently been under consideration, the Fixed Alternative and the Bascule Alternative, was made by Bob Landry with New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NHDOT). Within the presentation, representatives from the City of Portsmouth Water Division, the Town of Rye, and the Town of New Castle offered perspectives on the project. The presentations were followed by public discussion.

Bob Landry outlined what has taken place on the project since the last Public Information meeting in May 2014. Following the meeting, NHDOT received over 30 written comments from local residents, businesses, conservationists, historic preservationists, and mooring owners. The Town of Rye Select Board requested that a Benefit-Cost Analysis be undertaken on the two alternatives. The Draft Benefit-Cost Analysis was undertaken in the summer and fall of 2014, and was recently finalized following input from the project's Public Advisory Committee.

After showing renderings of both the Fixed and Bascule Alternatives, Bob Landry summarized the findings of the Benefit-Cost Analysis. It was determined that the Fixed Alternative would result in lower capital and maintenance costs (approximately \$9.9 million) than the Bascule Alternative. In addition, the Fixed Alternative could result in a slight reduction in noise. However, dredging would be easier and more cost effective under the Bascule Alternative. The Bascule Alternative would also provide for potential growth in commercial fishing, boat-related economic activity, and tourism revenue; it would allow for the Back Channel to serve as safe harbor during storms; and it would provide for improved resiliency in the event of sea level rise.

Bob Landry stated that the Fixed Alternative is NHDOT's preferred alternative due to reduced capital and maintenance cost totaling approximately \$10 million. He outlined the next steps in the process, including the preparation of a U.S. Coast Guard Bridge Permit, U.S. Army Corps permits, and a NHDES Shoreland, Coastal Zone, and Wetlands Permit; Section 7 and Essential Fish Habitat Consultation with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; and the preparation of a Section 4(f) evaluation, a revised Determination of Effects memorandum, and a Memorandum of Agreement with the New Hampshire State Historic Preservation Office.

Brian Goetz, Deputy Director of Public Works for the City of Portsmouth, outlined the potential to run a new water line across the bridge if the Fixed Alternative were selected. He explained that the City of Portsmouth Water Division services approximately 8,000 accounts, including households in New Castle and Rye. The New Castle water system is served by several mains, two of which run under Little Harbor. These lines have a history of leaks and are difficult to maintain. As part of a 2013 master planning effort, the Portsmouth Water Division evaluated running a new line across a fixed bridge. According to Brian Goetz, this alternative would cost approximately \$600,000 less than running the line under water.

Selectman Priscilla Jenness spoke on behalf of the Town of Rye. She read a January 26, 2015 letter from the Rye Board of Selectmen to NHDOT which supports NHDOT's selection of the Fixed Bridge as their preferred alternative. The letter states that the Board of Selectmen supports a fixed span because it would save money, allowing for funds to be diverted to other red-listed bridges in the state. In addition, it would facilitate water system improvements, specifically a new water line that would increase fire flows and improve peak hour water pressure. A fixed span would also allow for the continued dredging of the Back Channel. However, the letter points out that the Back Channel is narrow and shallow, and that it is not configured to accommodate large boats in the future, even with maintenance dredging.

Selectman Dave McGuckin spoke on behalf of the Town of New Castle. He indicated that last May the town made a recommendation for a bascule span. However, since that time, they have learned of the opportunity to run a new water line across a fixed bridge. This new line would address the low water pressure at the south end of the island. As such, the New Castle Selectmen now support a fixed bridge.

A question and answer period followed the presentation. Questions posed by attendees are outlined below. Unless otherwise noted, responses were provided by NHDOT.

Questions:

Q. The current bascule bridge requires four hours-notice to open it. With a new bascule span, how could the bridge be opened in under four hours?

A. A remote opening could be used, however, NHDOT might have to send someone to the bridge to ensure that there are not pedestrians on it.

Q. Has a lighting plan been developed? If not, can residents participate in the plan when it is developed?

A. A lighting plan will be developed as part of the final design. Residents will be able to review the plan at that point.

Q. Does NHDOT know why the New Castle-Rye Bridge was constructed as a lift bridge?

A. We don't know. There was also a lift bridge at Goat Island.

Q. To what extent is the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers committed to dredging?

A. Dredging is not currently funded. The Army Corps has indicated that they would not stop dredging if a fixed bridge were installed, but that funding for dredging is difficult.

Q. Are there any statistics on the number of times the bridge has been opened for safe harbor?

A. Dick Gordon, the former Portsmouth Harbormaster, indicated that he didn't think so, however he does believe that the Back Channel has been used for safe harbor during hurricanes.

Q. If the new water line is intended to be a back-up system, why couldn't it be configured with a shut-off valve that would allow it to be run across a bascule bridge?

A. Brian Goetz indicated that he isn't aware of a fast disconnect that would allow for this.

Q. Would the installation of a water line lower the vertical clearance under a fixed bridge?

A. No, it would not restrict clearance under the bridge.

Q. Is the bridge being constructed off site and brought in on a barge?

A. Although construction would be expedited, the bridge would not be built entirely off site.

Q. Are there advantages to running the water line below ground, specifically the threat of vandalism or terrorism?

A. Brian Goetz said that there would not be advantages. Instead, there are disadvantages to running the water line below ground, as it's harder to fix when leaks occur.

Q. How long would the bridge be closed if a bascule bridge were selected?

A. Approximately two months (note that this statement was in error; the closure would be three months).

Q. Can the Coast Guard comment on the use of the Back Channel as a safe harbor?

A. Lieutenant David Bourbeau with the Coast Guard indicated that it is an important issue.

Q. The focus of the presentation was on the difference in cost between the two alternatives. Can you explain why there is such a difference?

A. Jim Murphy, a member of the HDR Consultant Team, indicated that the capital cost of a bascule bridge would be \$8.8 million more than fixed span. The majority of the \$8.8 million is in the bascule pier which would require more drill shafts, as well as a mechanical/electrical system.

Q. Does the bascule housing need to be replaced?

A. Jim Murphy stated that, based on their analysis, all the components of the bridge will require replacement.

Q. How deep would the bascule pier go down? Would it restrict water flow through the channel?

A. Jim Murphy said that base of the hollow bascule pier would be approximately at the same elevation as low tide, and would sit on drilled shafts. As such, this would allow water to flow under it.

Q. How would the width of the opening change?

A. It is currently 28'-9" but would increase to 51'-6" with a fixed bridge and to 44'-6" with a bascule bridge.

Q. What happens next?

A. NHDOT will move forward and select an alternative. The issue for NHDOT is the \$8.8 million difference in capital cost between the Fixed and Bascule Alternatives. There is a \$260 million backlog of bridge work in the state and there's less federal funding than there was 10 years ago.

Q. How long are you accepting written comments?

A. Comments will be accepted through February.

Q. When will construction begin?

A. NHDOT doesn't have funding until 2017.

Q. If we aren't happy with a fixed bridge, who should we talk to about this? Should we talk to the Coast Guard?

A. Yes, as well as the Governor and your Senators.

Additional Comments Provide by the Public:

- When a fixed bridge is installed, the Back Channel will degrade.
- The Benefit-Cost Analysis looked at both quantitative and qualitative benefits. The qualitative benefits of a bascule are important, in particular, the fact that the bridge has historically been a lift bridge.
- The \$10 million difference between the Bascule and Fixed Alternatives is misleading because the cost would be spread over time.
- A member of the Portsmouth Division of Ports and Harbors Advisory Committee stated that at the May 2014 public information meeting fisherman spoke about the need for a hurricane hole as safe harbor during storms. The water line is really not germane to this issue.
- A representative from the Freedom Boat Club indicated that they are opposed to a fixed bridge. A fixed bridge wouldn't allow cranes to get into the Back Channel to do repairs. In addition, a fixed bridge would restrict the use of the Back Channel as a safe harbor and would limit the type of boats they could put in their fleet. He also indicated that his tow boat could not pass under a fixed bridge.
- The Director of Portsmouth Ports and Harbors, Geno Marconi, stated that the Back Channel was last dredged in the 1960s. In recent legislation, the U.S. Congress included specific language to address the dredging of small boat harbors. With a fixed bridge, the Army Corps would still be able to get dredging equipment into the Back Channel, but it would be more costly.
- Esther Kennedy, a member of the Portsmouth City Council and area business owner, stated that the cost of the water line needs to be taken out of the equation. Instead, the community should be looking at the economic benefit of having a lift bridge. She said that sea level rise and the increasing severity of storms needs to be taken into consideration since this bridge will have a long life. She asked whether anyone wants to give up access to the Back Channel.
- A Rye resident stated that the economic impact of a fixed bridge has not been sufficiently evaluated. He indicated that, due to the lead time required to open the current bridge, it essentially operates as a fixed span. However, a bascule that operates well would allow for the expansion of water-based activities. Furthermore, if the additional \$10 million cost of a bascule bridge is spread over many years, it isn't significant. Replacing the bridge with a fixed span would be short-sighted.
- The owner of the Heritage, a commercial cruise vessel, stated that maintaining a bascule bridge is important, as it will make dredging easier. He indicated that he kept a boat in the Back Channel that he took through the bascule bridge.
- Dick Gordon, the former Portsmouth Harbormaster, stated that the Barge Pier in Portsmouth Harbor will no longer be available for use as a safe harbor. Eliminating two safe harbors is too much.
- A local business owner stated that his property is zoned as a waterfront use. A fixed bridge has the potential to further restrict what he can do with his property.
- The President of the New Hampshire Commercial Fishermen's Association, Erik Anderson, stated that there's a long history of commercial fishing in the area. He's not convinced that the Army Corps would dredge the Back Channel if a fixed bridge is installed, as logistically it would be more difficult.
- If a deep water boat can't access the Back Channel due to a fixed bridge that could be considered a taking.
- It's too bad that the Coast Guard isn't in a position to make a decision now.
- Once a fixed bridge is constructed, there's no going back. It could be very limiting. NHDOT shouldn't take a short cut just to save money.
- Lots of kayaks go under the bridge. The size of the bascule pier looks intimidating.

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- A fixed bridge would make it more difficult for the marinas and boat clubs to get a crane in to drive piles.
- The presentation is one-sided as it relates to the savings from a fixed bridge. It seems commercial activity would cover the \$10 million easily.
- NHDOT stated that the Town of Rye believes that even with maintenance dredging large boats couldn't access the Back Channel.