

New Castle-Rye 16127 Final Design

New Castle-Rye Bridge Project Summary of Meeting Public Advisory Committee (PAC) May 24, 2018, 4:30 p.m.

Attendees:

PAC members

Dave McGuckin, Selectman, Town of New Castle
Gary Rumph, Manager, Wentworth Homeowners Association
Jim Cerny, Board Member, New Castle Historical Society
John Habig, Rye Abutter
David Walker, Rockingham Planning Commission

Existing and former elected officials

David Borden, former State Representative
Nancy Stiles, former State Senator
Representative Kate Murray
Thomas Maher, New Castle Select Board Chair

New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NHDOT)

Victoria Chase, Project Manager

HDR Consultant Team

Jim Murphy, Project Engineer
Jill Barrett, Public Involvement
Stephanie Dyer-Carroll, Historic Resources

A meeting of the Public Advisory Committee (PAC) for the New Castle-Rye Bridge Project was held on Thursday, May 22, 2018 in the Macomber Room of the New Castle, NH, Library. Victoria Chase, NHDOT Project Manager for the bridge project, welcomed the PAC, noting that it had been a year since the committee last met. Jill Barrett briefly outlined the agenda. She noted that though it was a committee meeting, NHDOT welcomed participation by members of the public in attendance.

Stephanie Dyer-Carroll with FHI then provided a brief update on progress since the last meeting a year ago. She explained that the team had advanced the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process through coordination with review agencies. During the project development process, critical feedback has been received from the US Coast Guard (USCG), the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services (NHDES). An internal review draft of the NEPA Environmental Assessment (EA) is substantially complete, and multiple supporting documents have been prepared and submitted to review agencies. These documents include an Essential Fish Habitat Assessment, a Biological Assessment, a Coastal Consistency Determination, and a Sediment Sampling Report.

Ms. Dyer-Carroll explained that the Section 106 process had also been advanced over the last year. Three consultation meetings were held in 2017 with the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources (NHDHR) and consulting parties to discuss the effects of replacement with a fixed bridge on historic properties in the vicinity of the project site. These properties include the National Register-eligible New

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Castle-Rye Bridge, the 1874 Rye Bridge Abutments, the Wentworth By the Sea Hotel, the Wentworth-Coolidge Mansion, and Creek Farm. Effects forms were developed which evaluated the effects of both replacement with a fixed bridge and replacement with a bascule bridge on these historic properties. The analysis determined that replacement with a fixed bridge would result in an adverse effect on the bridge itself, but that there would not be adverse effects on the other resources. A Determination of Effect was completed by NHDOT and FHWA and signed by NHDHR.

Ms. Dyer-Carroll then explained that the 1994 Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) for the replacement of the Scammell Bridge in Dover has been an important factor in the consultation. The Scammell MOA stated that the New Castle-Rye Bridge and the Seabrook-Hampton Bridge, as the two remaining bascule bridges in the state, would be preserved unless under extraordinary circumstances such as natural disaster, prohibitive cost for rehabilitation, or severe environmental impacts caused an alternative route consideration. Ms. Dyer-Carroll said that both NHDHR and consulting parties expressed concern for the potential loss of the bascule bridge type in the state, and that the mitigation for removing/replacing the bridge is anticipated to be a major discussion. Because the New Castle-Rye and Seabrook-Hampton Bridge projects are tied together by the MOA, NHDOT has decided to consider the mitigation for the two projects together. A Historic Context Report is being undertaken which will provide insight into the maritime use of these two bridges and will support the Section 106 consultation for both projects.

Jim Murphy with HDR then laid out the schedule for both projects moving forward. He shared that NHDOT will advance the EAs for both projects simultaneously since the Seabrook-Hampton Bridge project is expected to have similar issues to New Castle-Rye. Since the New Castle-Rye Bridge EA has been substantially advanced, the Seabrook-Hampton Bridge project will need to catch up. The Seabrook-Hampton Bridge project is kicking off this month and both the New Castle-Rye and Seabrook-Hampton EAs are expected to be available for public review in the summer of 2019. If it's determined that the projects won't result in significant adverse environmental impacts, a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) will be issued by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) for each project.

Mr. Murphy said that a condition assessment of the New Castle-Rye Bridge was undertaken in April 2018 which showed the coating systems are holding up well. Inspections will continue to be undertaken at six-month intervals and no reduction in the bridge's load posting is anticipated. Mr. Murphy then shared a proposed schedule for both projects, noting that the goal is to advertise the New Castle-Rye Bridge project in the fall of 2019, with construction beginning in late 2020.

Following the formal presentation, PAC members and members of the public asked questions and offered information or concerns. Questions are noted below in italics with responses made by NHDOT or the consultant team members. Comments are included at the end.

Q – Who ultimately makes the decision on the type of bridge that will be built? NHDOT? FHWA?

A - NHDOT will propose a bridge type but the ability to move forward and build the NEPA process and permits are to be reviewed by other agencies. Other agencies must weigh in and, in the case of the USCG and USACE, grant a permit. FHWA is the lead agency on the NEPA process.

Q – Would the mechanical components of the historic bridge be replicated in the new bridge?

A – No, it would be a modern bridge with a bascule function.

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Q – Wasn't the bridge design for New Castle-Rye determined a year ago? When will the decision be made?

A – NHDOT decided to move forward with designing a fixed bridge but must complete the NEPA process and permits. The project schedule will be delayed so that the NEPA process aligns with that of the Seabrook-Hampton bascule bridge project.

Q- Isn't there any way of separating these two bridge projects?

A – The projects have been moving forward as separate projects, but the two bridges are linked together in the 1994 Scammell MOA. NHDOT has concluded that the most expeditious way to advance the New Castle-Rye bridge project is to consider it together with Seabrook-Hampton in the Section 106 process. They have made the decision to accelerate planning for the Seabrook-Hampton project, so the Scammell MOA can be addressed.

Q – Can you advance the Section 106 consultation on Seabrook-Hampton more quickly?

A – The schedule as presented is already aggressive. The design needs to be advanced for Seabrook-Hampton in order to carry it through the NEPA and Section 106 processes.

Q - Is the concern about the potential loss of the last two bascule bridges in the state related to the type of bridge design it represents or because of the role of these bridges in the state's history?

A – NHDOT recently commissioned a study of the historic context of the bascule bridges to gain a better understanding of their history in New Hampshire. We think the information that will be provided will help the Department move through the process of determining what type of bridge will be built.

Q – Who decides if the additional \$10 million needed to build a bascule bridge rather than a fixed bridge for New Castle-Rye is worth it?

A – NHDOT advances the preferred alternative.

Q – Who said we should stop for the Scammell MOA?

A – NHDOT decided to delay the New Castle project so in order to collect more information and to align the two projects.

Q – Will the NH State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) settle for one bascule bridge?

A – We do not currently know.

Q – Would the NH SHPO accept a bridge that looks like the current bridge but doesn't open?

A – During the Section 106 consultation, navigable access to the Back Channel has been an important issue as the bridge's function is a key component of its significance.

Q – A year ago, we understood you had all the approvals. Was this incorrect?

A – Last year NHDOT's preferred alternative was identified, but approvals are still required by several regulatory agencies.

Q – Is NH SHPO the one holding this up?

A – In addition to involvement at the state level, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) has weighed in, providing guidance on how to address the commitments in the Scammell MOA. Ultimately, this is a federal process with involvement from multiple federal and state agencies and consulting parties.

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Q – When will we know what type of bridge will be constructed?

A – The EA will be released in the summer of 2019, but the EA must complete a review period before the document is finalized.

Q – What goes into a NEPA document?

A – EAs can be complex documents. At the outset, data collection must be undertaken to understand the existing environmental resources in the area. These include not only natural resources, but also socio-economics and cultural resources. At the same time, alternatives need to be developed to a sufficient level of detail that their impacts can be assessed. Then impacts are assessed and mitigation measures are identified. As part of the process, a series of supporting documents will be prepared.

Q – Are the two projects being tied together to get a fixed bridge in Seabrook-Hampton?

A – That is not the intent of this approach. While constructing a fixed bridge in Seabrook-Hampton is possible, we haven't started looking at the specifics in Seabrook-Hampton so we do not know.

Q – Why is so much time being spent on this? Can't someone high up make a decision?

A – NHDOT decided the best strategy is to advance Seabrook-Hampton so the Environmental Assessment for both projects and proposed bridge type will be reviewed at the same time. This strategy was approved by the agency's Commissioner.

Comments:

- Public safety should be a driving factor in the schedule. The causeway has been impassible on several occasions in recent storms. If we had an extreme fire, a fire truck might not be able to access the island. Safety should be prioritized over historic concerns.
- The completion of the New Castle-Rye Bridge is tied to the Wentworth Road waterline. The line is important to improve water pressure at the south end of New Castle Island. If NHDOT were to replace the current bridge with another bascule bridge, the waterline would have to be run through the water, requiring disturbance of the riverbed and thereby causing environmental impacts.
- Two years ago, the Seabrook-Hampton Bridge project wasn't funded. Now it is, which contributes to concerns about the loss of bridge type in the state. A
- This delay adds another year. It's disappointing.
- The longer this goes on, the longer there is no waterline. The City of Portsmouth is holding off on their planning until a decision is made on the bridge type.

The meeting adjourned at 5:45 p.m.