



Hinsdale, NH – Brattleboro, VT Connecticut River Bridge Project

Project Advisory Committee Meeting #5

**10 Main Street
Hinsdale, NH 03451**

MINUTES

December 18, 2017

Project Advisory Committee: Peter Elwell (Chair), *Town Manager, Town of Brattleboro, VT*; Michael Abbott, *Representative, New Hampshire State Legislature*; Stephanie Bonin, *Executive Director, The Downtown Brattleboro Alliance*; Mollie Burke, *Representative, Vermont State Legislature*; John Gomarlo, *Member/Resident, Southwest Region Planning Commission (SWRPC) Transportation Advisory Committee/Town of Winchester, NH*; Bob Harcke, *President, Hinsdale Commercial and Industrial Development Commission*; Kathryn Lynch, *Community Development Coordinator, Town of Hinsdale*; Fred Moriarty, *Board of Trustees Treasurer, Brattleboro Museum and Art Center*; Lew Sorenson, *Member/Resident, Windham Regional Commission (WRC) Transportation Committee/Town of Dummerston, VT*; Ed Smith, *Member/Resident, SWRPC Transportation Advisory Committee/Town of Hinsdale, NH*

Project Advisory Committee Lead Team: Chris Baker, *Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTTrans)*; Mari Brunner, *SWRPC*; Don Lyford, *New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NHDOT)*; J. B. Mack, *SWRPC*; Erica Roper, *WRC*; Bill Saffian, *NHDOT*; David Scott, *NHDOT*; Trent Zanes, *NHDOT*

Guests: Jason Cooper, *The Downtown Brattleboro Alliance*; Clare Hudon, *Barrows and Fisher Oil Company*; Jay Kahn, *New Hampshire State Senator, District 10*

I. Welcome and Introductions

Chair Elwell called the meeting to order at 10:04 a.m. and attendees introduced themselves.

II. Approval of Minutes of June 12, 2017 Meeting

The minutes of June 12, 2017 were approved by unanimous vote.

III. January 2018 Public Hearing

Don Lyford said that there is a public hearing for the Hinsdale, NH – Brattleboro, VT Connecticut River Bridge Project scheduled for Thursday, January 18, 2017 at 7:00 p.m. Members of the public can testify in-person at the hearing, or they can submit written testimony ahead of the hearing. Following the public hearing, the Commissioner will make a finding either for or against the project. Chair Elwell asked if VTTrans will conduct a similar public hearing in Vermont. Chris Baker said that VTTrans has determined that the public hearing in New Hampshire will satisfy the State of Vermont's needs for moving forward on the project. J. B. Mack asked if someone from VTTrans will need to be present at the public hearing. Chris Baker and Chair Elwell said they would both be present at the Hinsdale public hearing. Mike Abbot suggested recording the meeting in order to accurately capture public comments.

IV. TIGER Application

Don Lyford reported that the NHDOT has applied for a Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grant. He said that there is \$500 million in funds available through this program and the funds are awarded through a competitive application process. This is the 9th round of funding. The NHDOT has applied for \$20 million in order to address some of the costs of the new bridge as well as refurbish the existing bridges. He said that the NHDOT plans to maintain the existing bridges whether or not the agency receives the TIGER grant. Molly Burke asked if the NHDOT has requested letters of support for their application. Don Lyford said that VTrans Secretary Flynn submitted a letter of support, however it was not a joint application.

Chair Elwell asked what will happen if the TIGER grant is not received. Don Lyford responded that the NHDOT could potentially block off the existing bridges with bollards and not refurbish them, however nothing has been decided. NHDOT is interested in hearing ideas for how the bridges should be refurbished. Jay Kahn asked what the total cost of the Hinsdale - Brattleboro Bridge project is. Don Lyford said it is about \$40 million. Jay Kahn asked how the TIGER grant process might affect the timing of the Hinsdale - Brattleboro Bridge project. Don Lyford said that the project will be advertised in September 2019 and the TIGER grant is not expected to affect the current timeline. Bob Harcke asked if all of the TIGER funds could be used on the new bridge rather than the existing bridges. Don Lyford said that it is possible.

V. Overlook and Pier Protection Discussion

Bill Saffian provided a handout (see attachment) and projected an image, both of which showed the original pier design and three options for a new pier design. He explained that the NHDOT did a hydraulic analysis which revealed the Q_{100} flood level is higher than originally assumed. In the original pier design, the pointed and armored "nose" of the pier extended three feet above and below the normal water elevation of 220. The purpose of the pointed nose is to break up ice floes on the upstream side of the bridge. However, with the calculated Q_{100} flood elevation at 230.7 and discovery of historical Brattleboro photographs showing ice from the river on adjacent railroad tracks, the project team decided to raise the ice protection to at least the Q_{100} elevation. This is a rise of approximately 7 feet above the original pier protection design, or about 10 feet above the normal water level.

Bill Saffian reviewed the proposed pier design options. Option 1 involves raising the original protection element of the bridge to the Q_{100} flood elevation of 230.7. The protection element would be pointed and armored on the upstream side only. Most of the time, the concrete protection element would be exposed and visible. Option 2 would leave the original pier protection element as it is in the original design and add a pointed nose to the columns on both the upstream and downstream sides for symmetry. The pointed nose would only extend partway up the columns to the Q_{100} flood elevation. Option 3 is the same as Option 2 except that the pointed nose would extend all the way up to the top of the columns. For both options 2 and 3, a pointed nose would be added to the downstream end of the original protection element to create symmetry with the pointed noses added to the pier columns.

Chair Elwell asked if there is a cost difference between the three pier options. Bill Saffian said that there is not a significant difference in cost, however Option 2 might be a little more complicated to construct. Kathryn Lynch asked whether ice floes could potentially damage the stone wall façade on the piers in any of the options. Bill Saffian said that the pointed and armored nose feature will break up the ice and allow it to pass without causing any major damage, but there might be some minor scratching or spalling. Mike Abbott asked whether the Vernon Dam was contacted in regards to the high water level. Bill Saffian said that they were not contacted. However, dam officials did not report any water level changes to recent FEMA flood maps, so it is not likely that the dam will affect the water level significantly. Erica Roper said

that she prefers Option 3 because it will continue to protect against ice floes even if the water level gets higher. Chair Elwell agreed and added that he prefers the aesthetic of Option 3.

Motion: To recommend the “full height” column protection design option.

Motion made by Ed Smith. Seconded by Lew Sorenson. Motion approved unanimously.

Bill Saffian said that at the last meeting, the group discussed adding one, two, or three bump outs to the bridge to serve as overlooks. With one bump out, the overlook would be centered over the main channel of the river. With two bump outs, there would be one on the main channel and one on the side channel. With three bump outs, there would be two overlooking the main channel and one on the side channel. The bump outs would be centered on the bridge piers.

Lew Sorenson asked what the view would look like from the side channel overlook. Bill Saffian said that the proposed overlook will be about 20-25 feet higher than the current bridge, so a person standing on the bump out will be able to see the existing bridge as well as the New Hampshire hills to the right. Lew Sorenson said he is curious whether the view will be decent. J. B. Mack said that the group discussed the possibility of getting images to show what the views would look like at a previous meeting. Bill Saffian said that one idea was to use drones to take pictures at the exact coordinates of the proposed bump outs. Mike Abbott said it would be helpful to have images before making a recommendation for the bump out placement.

Bill Saffian said that the group originally discussed the bump outs as a destination that would contain placemaking elements such as historic markers. Mike Abbott asked about the cost of the bump outs. Bill Saffian replied that the cost of the bump outs is nominal in comparison to the total project cost. He doesn't know the exact figure but would estimate about \$2,000-\$5,000 per bump out. Mike Abbott said that there is a boat launch on the island where the current bridge crosses, however the island is mostly used by homeless people. This issue has been raised at previous meetings.

Stephanie Bonin asked whether the cost of placemaking elements such as historic markers is included in the project budget, and Bill Saffian said that it is. Erica Roper asked whether the development of the historic marker is included in the budget, or just the installation. Don Lyford said that the project budget would cover the total cost of the historic markers.

J. B. Mack said that he talked to the Brattleboro Reformer about using their drones to take pictures at the lookout locations. They were receptive but would like NHDOT or VTrans staff to accompany them to make certain they are taking the right pictures. Fred Moriarty said there used to be a park on the island. J. B. Mack offered to have SWRPC do some ground work researching placemaking elements for the proposed overlooks and invited WRC to participate in this effort as well. Chair Elwell asked both of the regional planning commissions to work on the historic markers to which J. B. Mack and Erica Roper agreed. Mike Abbott asked about the cost of maintaining the bridge lighting, historic markers, bump outs, etc. He said there could be vandalism to historic markers. Chair Elwell said he was aware that the municipalities were responsible for maintaining the lights and for winter snow removal, but he was not aware that they were responsible for other maintenance. Don Lyford said he is not sure who would be responsible for maintaining the historic markers, but he can ask and get back to the group.

VI. Planning for Existing Bridges

Don Lyford said that the NHDOT plans to retain the existing bridges for bicycle and pedestrian use. The bridges will be blocked off with a gate or bollards and will allow for emergency vehicle access to the island. He said that there are several issues to consider, such as whether to replace the pavement leading up to the

bridge with stone dust or keep the pavement in place, whether to get new light fixtures, etc. He said it would be helpful to have a committee to provide recommendations for the existing bridges. Molly Burke said that she thinks a committee would be a good idea. There is a lot of interest among Brattleboro residents to participate in such a committee. J. B. Mack noted that the committee may want to talk about other issues besides the bridge design, such as visioning process for how the bridges and island should be used. He suggested that SWRPC and WRC could help facilitate this discussion.

Erica Roper said that there is a grant that might support planning and community engagement for the existing bridges called the "Better Connections Grant." In order to apply, the group would need to coordinate a pre-application meeting before the end of the year.

Fred Moriarty said that a business is moving into Georges Field near Walmart and as a result there might be more pedestrian traffic from Brattleboro to Hinsdale. Kathryn Lynch said she agreed with J. B. Mack that the charge of the group should go beyond bridge design and she would like the committee to address the homeless issue on the island. Mike Abbott said he would like to avoid a similar situation to the old bridge between Chesterfield and Vermont, which has not been well maintained. Ed Smith said he would like to hear more about the maintenance costs that would be associated with the existing bridges. Don Lyford said that, in the past, questions have been raised about the percentage breakdown for bridge maintenance. Chair Elwell said that in addition to the percentage breakdown, there is a question about whether the maintenance should be covered by the municipalities or the state agencies. Ed Smith announced that the Great River Hydro Company is renewing their 40-year license. The Connecticut River Conservancy is interested in recreational projects near the river, and the Great River Hydro Company is in support of that idea.

Bob Harcke asked whether the TIGER grant funds could be used to remove the existing bridges. Don Lyford said it is not a possibility because the NEPA document assumes the existing bridges will remain in place. If they are taken down, it becomes an historic impact and the NEPA process would need to be revisited.

J. B. Mack asked if the existing bridge committee should be connected to the project advisory committee in any way. Mike Abbott said that he supports forming a committee to address the existing bridges, especially since there is a potential grant that would need immediate action. Erica Roper said that WRC could take the lead on the grant, which would cover planning and scoping costs. Chair Elwell said that he thinks the committee should be a partnership between the two states, and that it should report back to this group. He noted it will be important to create a vision for the existing bridges. John Gomarlo suggested having the committee report back to the project advisory committee. He recommended that the committee include members of the public from both Hinsdale and Brattleboro. He would also recommend that some of the members of the project advisory committee sit on the existing bridge committee.

Jason Cooper asked whether the TIGER funds could pay to refurbish the rail trestle bridge further downstream to improve connectivity. Don Lyford said they could not be used for that purpose. Bob Harcke asked whether discussions regarding the existing bridges would delay construction of the new bridge. Bill Saffian said they would not because they are two separate processes. Work on the existing bridges cannot begin until the new bridge is finished. Don Lyford said that the NHDOT can advertise the new bridge separately from the existing bridges, unless the TIGER grant requires that they be advertised together.

Chair Elwell asked what the next steps should be. He said that the regional planning commissions have offered to provide administrative support, and that both towns will also be involved. Kathryn Lynch said she would like to see Chair Elwell and herself on the committee as well as Hinsdale Police Chief Faulkner. There are many Hinsdale residents who have expressed interest as well.

Erica Roper said that, due to the timing of the grant, it may make sense to have a meeting to discuss the grant in the immediate future. Once the group knows whether or not the grant application was accepted, the committee can develop a more detailed scope of work. Ed Smith suggested that there should be two members from each state from the project advisory committee on the committee. The rest should be determined by the regional planning commissions.

Jay Kahn said it is important to make sure the purpose of the committee is clear. He said that the purpose is to develop a vision for the existing bridges and bring recommendations to the project advisory committee. Ed Smith said that the committee should also discuss a vision for the island and how it should be used. Chair Elwell agreed that the committee should be charged with creating a vision and recommendations for both the existing bridges and the island. Erica Roper said the next step will be to check with VTrans to make sure the grant is eligible for projects that cross state lines. Molly Burke said that a focus of the grant is economic development, so the committee should be able to make a strong case.

VII. Public Comment

Jay Kahn asked about the timeline for the project. Don Lyford said that bids will be ready to go in September 2019. Jay Kahn asked if there is anything that can be done to speed up this timeline. He would like to see construction begin in 2019, if possible. Don Lyford said that there are two major controlling factors that affect the timeline. The first is acquisition of the right-of-way. Vermont has already begun this process, however the timeline is already very tight for purchasing and clearing the right-of-way. The other factor is the bridge design.

Jason Cooper said that there is a lot of interest in connecting Vermont to the Fort Hill Trail in Hinsdale. He noted that currently, the shoulders along the roads leading to the trail are not wide enough for bicyclists to safely ride out of the travel lane. He said that an important consideration for the project should be the bicycle and pedestrian connections leading up to the bridge.

Jay Kahn asked what the expected completion date is for the bridge. Bill Saffian said that, originally, the NHDOT estimated that the project would take two years to construct. However, the NHDOT Bureau of Construction is estimating that it will take 3-4 years for construction. The end date is likely 2023 or 2024. Jay Kahn asked whether the existing bridges would take longer to refurbish. Don Lyford said that they would because work will not begin on the existing bridges until after the new bridge is complete.

Fred Moriarty asked if lighting is still going to be addressed by the project advisory committee. Bill Saffian said that the NHDOT is still working with vendors and that there is not much to report at this time. Don Lyford said that one of the options the NHDOT considered was rail-mounted lights, however those are susceptible to vandalism. Bill Saffian said that they looked at one example where rail-mounted lights were used on a bicycle and pedestrian bridge with tubular rails. The components of the lighting were hidden inside the rails, however they were still vandalized. Another issue to consider with lighting is that it is a town asset, whereas the bridge itself is a state asset. He said that the goal of the lighting is not to light the sidewalk but rather to draw attention to the bridge. One possibility would be to have lights at each pier. Chair Elwell suggested that the group discuss this topic at the next meeting and asked NHDOT to bring lighting options. Erica Roper suggested looking into innovative lighting solutions that would be cost-effective to maintain and would meet everyone's needs. David Scott asked people to send any ideas to the NHDOT. Ed Smith said it would be important to consider the maintenance cost of the lighting.

Mike Abbott asked about the results of the bridge borings. Bill Saffian said that the bridge borings have been completed except for the Vermont side. NHDOT is still assessing the results.

VIII. Next Meeting

Chair Elwell asked the project lead team when the next meeting should be. Don Lyford said he would like to get drone footage of the lookout views before the next meeting. He said the next meeting could be in March, April, or later in 2018. Chair Elwell said that, in the meantime, the existing bridge committee should stay in communication with the project advisory committee.

IX. Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 11:37 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Mari Brunner
Planner