

Connecticut Department of Transportation
State Project No. 167-108
Heroes Tunnel Project, Bridge No. 00773
Route 15 Wilbur Cross Parkway through West Rock Ridge
Woodbridge, Hamden, New Haven

Wednesday, October 18, 2017
6:30 P.M. Open House
7:00 P.M. Presentation

Hamden Memorial Town Hall Auditorium
2370 Whitney Ave, Hamden, CT

Minutes of Public Information Meeting

Present:

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Approximately 43 people, not affiliated with the project were in attendance; see attached Sign-In sheet.

Presentation:

The purpose of the meeting was to inform the public of the initiation of the preliminary design phase of State Project No. 167-108, the Heroes Tunnel Project, which includes the rehabilitation/replacement of the Heroes Tunnel carrying Route 15 (Wilbur Cross Parkway) through West Rock Ridge in the Town of Woodbridge, Town of Hamden, and City of New Haven.

The public information meeting was organized into three segments; an open house prior to the presentation, a presentation by the Connecticut Department of Transportation (CTDOT) and the Department's consultant, CDM Smith and a forum for questions and comments. The one-half hour open house was hosted before the presentation began to allow the public to view various boards displayed throughout the room which depicted various elements of the project. The project was presented using a Microsoft PowerPoint along with a handout provided in English and Spanish. The presentation and handouts are available on the Heroes Tunnel Project website, www.heroestunnelproject.com and the Connecticut Department of Transportation website, www.ct.gov/dot, "CTDOT Links & Resources" – "Heroes (West Rock) Tunnel Project".

Additional materials were made available to attendees at the registration desk, specifically:

- Attendee Sign-In Sheet
- Project Comment Form (provided in English and Spanish)
- Title VI Notice to Beneficiaries (provided in English and Spanish)
- “I Speak Cards”
- Demographic Surveys (provided in English and Spanish)

Following is a summary of the presentation and comments.

Introduction:

A presentation was given by CTDOT and CDM Smith, organized under the following topics:

- Project Roles
- Project Location
- Project Purpose & Need
- Existing Conditions
- Rehabilitation Study Report
- Reconstruction Options
- Rehabilitation Options
- Environmental Documentation – NEPA/CEPA
- Public Involvement
- Potential Stakeholders
- Next Steps

The meeting was then opened to questions and comments from the public by the Department.

Public Comment and Questions:

Comment: What is the maximum/minimum construction timeline?

Determination/Discussion: The construction timeline depends on the selected alternative however, for planning purposes, it is anticipated construction will take approximately five years beginning in 2022.

Comment: Speaker stated they have driven the Merritt Parkway for over 28 years and have noticed drivers in the tunnel coming to a dead stop due to being afraid. Speaker does not believe widening alone will improve traffic flow. Also stated that in the fall the sun glare is a major concern and didn’t know if there was any mitigation for that.

Determination/Discussion: This is a recurring concern which the CTDOT/CDM Smith will assess further.

Comment: Can an open cut alternative take the place of the tunnel.

Determination/Discussion: We can consider that alternative, however there are many non-favorable issues including environmental impacts, rock removal, construction costs and the maintenance of traffic with this approach. Also, the detrimental impact an open cut would have on the park.

Comment: Speaker, a safety professional who has frequented the parkway for 50 years, stated as of late automatic headlights are adding to the congestion concerns. Headlights that go on automatically upon tunnel entry are being mistaken for brake lights, adding to the slowdown of traffic flow. They noted a change to the tunnel lighting 5 years ago has resulted in a worsening of contrast.

Determination/Discussion: CTDOT/CDM Smith is to assess the lighting conditions in the existing tunnel. The lighting is supposed to be brighter during the day than at night, however some of the existing systems that vary the illumination depending on the time of day are beginning to fail.

Comment: Has a road over the ridge been considered; there is a steep road with a similar grade coming down Woodbridge.

Determination/Discussion: No, as grade constraints are too significant.

Comment: Is it possible to remove the two barrels and install one large all-encompassing tunnel?

Determination/Discussion: This solution would be difficult to implement while maintaining traffic. There are other similar innovative solutions being considered such as utilizing a protective shield. However, due to the length of the tunnel and evacuation requirements for emergencies, a separate barrel is ideal to provide a safe route for emergency events.

Comment: Is the purpose of the proposed third barrel to accommodate three lanes of traffic and the Exit 59 On- Ramp? Is this to avoid merging inside the tunnel?

Determination/Discussion: The alignments for the new barrel consider the merging requirements of the Exit 59 On-Ramp. The alignments are planned to minimize environmental impacts while providing the proper geometry for ramp access. As of now, we are just considering a two-lane barrel, not three-lane. The new barrel will however be large enough to stripe for three lanes.

Comment: What about a temporary solution? Can a temporary road be built over the ridge? Has CTDOT considered this?

Determination/Discussion: This has not been considered, as the grade limitations are significant and traffic from the Exit 59 On-Ramp will still need to be accommodated.

Comment: What will be done with the abandoned tunnel?

Determination/Discussion: It has not been decided.

Comment: What are the solutions for Exit 59?

Determination/Discussion: Currently there are two, an immediate short-term project and a longer-term project.

Comment: Any thought to easing buses and tractor trailers on the parkway, or installing a physical barrier, many of the delays are caused by a bus sitting outside of the tunnel or trucks going down the middle of the tunnel.

Determination/Discussion: Wayward trucks on the parkway are a recurring problem and the solutions are not easy. This is a big issue in New York, they provide physical barriers to stop trucks before they travel under a bridge on a parkway.

Comment: Where would the temporary tunnel be?

Determination/Discussion: The east side.

Comment: Speaker suggested whitewashing the tunnel barrels or lining with white tiles to improve lighting and visibility.

Determination/Discussion: This is a valid point, improving visual perception will be considered.

Comment: What is the cost of the project?

Determination/Discussion: The cost of the project depends on the selected alternative; for planning purposes, the most expensive would cost 200 million dollars.

Comment: Follow up from previous question, what happens in 30 years when traffic increases?

Determination/Discussion: It is hard to predict what traffic will be like 30 years from now. That is part of the challenge of design and a well justified concern. Traffic projections will be obtained from the Department for use in the selection and design of the preferred alternative.

Comment: The rehabilitation diagram illustrated that the existing narrow sidewalks would disappear. If that happened the impact would cause people to drive much slower.

Comment: West River Water Shed Coalition – Everyone is faced with the same problem, a roadway designed as a parkway overtaken by single occupancy vehicles. How can you build a third barrel on the east side without impacting Wintergreen Brook and the Nature Center? A new bridge over Wintergreen Brook will be required.

Determination/Discussion: We are studying the environmental resources and are concerned with protecting the resources, especially the park since park land has a special status in Connecticut which also includes the Nature Center. Potential solutions could be to construct a new bridge over Wintergreen Brook that is longer than the existing bridges to reduce its impact. We will also be studying the visual impact to people on the highway and residents.

Comment: Traffic planning, has Route 15 been looked at? There is a significant deficit of circumferential routes around the project area. The connections are weak and there are no alternative routes that connect the “spokes of the wheel.”

Determination/Discussion: The team will review potential traffic impacts as a result of the construction.

Comment: The option for the third tunnel, will it be by drilling or blasting?

Determination/Discussion: Construction will utilize modern practices. The technique used will be dependent on the quality of the rock, which has not been determined.

Comment: A current problem experienced at the West Rock Nature Center and other properties is noise. Some days it's difficult to have a class at the center; can sound barriers be erected?

Determination/Discussion: This has not been investigated.

Comment: Does the team have previous experience with tunnels?

Determination/Discussion: Yes, CDM Smith has national and international tunnel experience.

Comment: Spalling has been noted under the Wintergreen Bridge, will this be repaired and/or replaced? Also, has future use of the temporary tunnel been considered to give access to local transit, for recreational use or serve pedestrian and bicycle commuters crossing through the ridge?

Determination/Discussion: CTDOT will consider future uses of the third barrel.

Comment: Does a project of this financial magnitude need to be passed by state legislation?

Determination/Discussion: Depending on the amount of state funding involved, some action may be required.

Comment: Have you looked at the existing drainage system? The existing system is handling water from the parkway and the ridge with a small pipe system. The excess runoff drains into West River without filtration.

Determination/Discussion: We will need to consider mitigation of water runoff and water quality to meet current state and federal standards. The new drainage system will meet state and federal standards.

Comment: Would the protective shell still accommodate two lanes for traffic?

Determination/Discussion: It would accommodate one lane during construction, however the feasibility of this approach requires more study. It is unique to the U.S. and has a potential for significant traffic implications and potential increased costs.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 8:25 p.m.