

Public Information Session
Council of Government
Route 1 Corridor Study
Westbrook, Connecticut
Tuesday, July 28, 2015
7:00 p.m.

The Public Information Session was called to order by Dennis Hallahan, Moderator at 7:00 p.m.

Mr. Hallahan led the Pledge of Allegiance.

Council of Government staff: Rob Haramut, Jean Davies, Planner, Sam Gold, Executive Director
Consultant: Susan VanBenschoten, Mike Moorehouse, Transportation Engineer
Westbrook: Dennis Hallahan, Meg Parulis, Planner, Noel Bishop, First Selectman

Approximately 100 residents in attendance

Mr. Bishop reported that as a result of resident feedback from the 7/6 meeting, the proposed Boardwalk shown in the draft documents has been removed.

The River Council of Government (RiverCOG) is one of the state's nine planning regions and is made up of 17 municipalities. The Board consists of the First Selectman of each municipality. It is a non-partisan organization based on collaborative decision making procedures. The RiverCOG facilitates projects for municipalities, including transportation projects. For any project to move forward, state and town approval is required.

Ms. Davies, COG Planner, reported on the history of the Rte. 1 Corridor Study. The Rte. 1 Corridor Study concept developed over 10 years ago. The purpose of the Plan was to develop a conceptual Plan to address current and long-range travel and quality of life issues along Rte. 1 and as an advisory document to be used for any future planning and development on Rte. 1 by the State. One hundred thousand dollars of federal and state funding was used for the Study.

Ms. VanBenschoten reported that during the 18 month study, public outreach charrettes were held throughout Westbrook, Old Saybrook and Clinton. These small working groups provided guidance and input for the Corridor Study. The Public Comment portion of the project was extended until the end of August. The public was encouraged to contact the COG with their questions, comments and concerns.

A Power Point of the Plan was presented by Ms. VanBenschoten, Fitzgerald & Halladay and is available on the River COG's website.

Prior to the construction of I-95, Route 1 was the principal road from Maine to Florida. A main concern was that no one wanted Rte. 1 to become the overflow for I-95. Mr. Mike Moorehouse, Transportation Engineer, provided an outline of how the data collected was analyzed.

Ms. VanBenschoten reported that Meg Parulis, Westbrook Planner, requested that in Westbrook, the Study focus on Town Green, Marine District and Grove Beach Road area. She continued that the Public Comment period has been extended and all recommendations may be modified prior to the Study being finalized.

QUESTION AND ANSWER PERIOD

Mr. Tony Cozza provided and read a statement prepared by the Council of Beaches. This statement is available in the First Selectman's office.

Catherine Stone – 1278 Old Clinton Road – was in support of the Town's discussion regarding Rte. 1 and the recommendations regarding accessibility for bicycles and pedestrians which will make the Town more "livable". She favored making public access to beach areas more obvious (additional signage) for residents and tourists.

Mr. Gould – Seaside Ave. – requested clarification on the Town Green traffic patterns. Ms. VanBenschoten reported that the concept is to keep one lane going west and two lanes going east and to bring the corner out.

Mr. Gould continued that the Singing Bridge is not compatible for bike traffic and is treacherous.

Mr. Gould expressed concern that the prior public input sessions were not well publicized and that any meetings held in the winter months may not be well-attended by the seasonal residents.

Regarding I-95, Mr. Gould asked if the Governor's Transportation Plan includes widening I-95 to 6 lanes. Mr. Moorehouse responded that the Governor's Plan does include 6 lanes on I-95.

Mr. Gould asked where the idea of the Boardwalk initiated and why it was ever a part of a Transportation Plan. Ms. VanBenschoten responded that the Boardwalk has been taken out of the Plan. The idea of the Boardwalk came from one of the public charrettes since walking is a form of transportation. The intent of the Boardwalk was to provide beach residents access from their neighborhoods to Rte. 1 (without the use of a car). No parking area that would allow individuals to walk from a parking lot to the beach was ever proposed.

Mr. Moorehouse reported that the reality is that many individuals get into their cars to go short distances (less than 3 miles). The Boardwalk could have provided for a walking environment to give residents easier access to Rte. 1 and to lessen the vehicle traffic on Rte. 1.

A resident reported that she moved to Westbrook for the "village" atmosphere. She felt that the proposed "pop-ups" would be more appropriate for a bigger venue. She favored maintaining the natural environment. She continued that the Singing Bridge is historic and there is no need to enhance it. She continued that there is not a tremendous amount of business growth and is concerned with the effect to local existing businesses if transient businesses are allowed.

Maria Botella – West Pond Meadow Road and Striper Ave., reported that additional police activity may result if this process goes through. She asked how any projects would be funded and who will be responsible for on-going maintenance and liability.

Ms. VanBenschoten reported that police activity (speeding/traffic activity) would most likely decrease if the areas are designed appropriately and that traffic calming initiatives result in less police enforcement.

Ms. Botella continued that tourists don't know the roads and are not familiar with the layout. If more tourists come into town, additional policing will be necessary.

Mr. Hallahan called the question out of order since the Study did not include Police Activity.

Regarding Ms. Botella's funding question, Ms. VanBenschoten reported that funding information is available on the website. Any of the \$3.8 million recommendations in Westbrook would be funded by the Town but only if the Town CHOOSES to do the a project; any project done in the State's Right of Way would be funded by the State. Many projects are eligible for various grants. Many of the expensive recommendations in the overall project pertain to upgrading the railroad bridges. Details of these costs are in the Study and on the website.

Paul Cusson – Boston Post Road spoke in favor of enhancing the safety on Rte. 1. He commented that curbing is a concern and referenced the circle in Killingworth that is high maintenance. He continued that narrowing Rte. 1 may have a negative effect for those trailering boats. He reported that the property owners should have been contacted for their input earlier in the process; especially if their property/business could be affected by the Study/Plan.

George Abraham – Grove Beach – Island View Beach Association President, was concerned about the proposed "gathering area" adjacent to the Grove Beach Community. He reported that a "gathering area" will not be used by residents to gather but by others to come to our beaches. The gathering spaces are unnecessary. This evening's presentation was thorough but the actual Plan has a lot of specifics that need to be discussed including food trucks and pop ups. In his opinion, they are not beneficial to Westbrook's economy. The Council of Beaches is against these suggestions.

Mr. Abraham commented that speed control suggestions will add more congestion to Rte. 1. In reality, a by-product of the Rte. 1 Corridor Study will be more congestion and the need for more traffic control. Costs of additional traffic controls will increase.

Mr. Abraham asked hen and to whom will the plan go next?

Mr. Gold responded that once the comment period is closed and the Study is modified, the Plan becomes the property of the Towns of Westbrook, Clinton and Old Saybrook. It will then be the Town's decision to pursue any, all, some or none of the recommendations in the Plan/Study. However, the State can do whatever they want to do on Rte. 1. This document will enable the Town to guide the DOT in any future projects. A copy of the Plan/Study will go to the DOT (the DOT funded the Study/Plan). This Plan/Study will carry no more weight with the DOT than any other plan that is submitted. Once all comments are received and the Plan is modified, appendices will be available.

Mr. Abraham asked "how binding is this plan" and can we opt out?

Mr. Gold responded that the Study/Plan is not binding in any way. If the Town does not want to pursue ideas, there is no obligation for them to do so. Westbrook controls its own Zoning Regulations and can control pop ups, food trucks etc. These are local decisions made by the Zoning Commission and no one

can force the Town to allow such uses. Mr. Gold reported that all comments will be documented and changes will be posted to website.

Gentleman – “Hold on to your wallet” because all Federal and State money comes out of your pocket.

Tony Cozza– Lilac Street – asked for a definition of “study recommendations modified and finalized”; who votes on it, who gets a say in it?

Mr. Gold reported that the goal of this evening’s meeting and the extension of the public comment timeline is to receive input to modify plan and to develop a Study/Plan acceptable to Westbrook.

Mr. Cozza - at the last meeting, we heard that COG selectmen had to vote on it?

Mr. Gold responded that a vote could take place but is not required. Any Plan/Study has more “weight” with the DOT if approved by a COG and State funding would be easier to access. Towns are in competition for State funding. If the Town does not want the DOT to spend money on Rte. 1, they won’t. The Town does not own Rte. 1 so town funds will not be used for any project on Rte. 1.

Ms. VanBenschoten added that by not wanting or adopting this plan, you won’t save money; it will just go somewhere else. Towns are constantly competing for State and Federal money. Any project in Westbrook is a decision that the Town would make; however, change will come here eventually and this Plan gives you the ability to control Westbrook’s future. This is a tool for you, if rejected, taxes won’t go down the money will just go to another community.

Janice Shaw – Pond Meadow and Seaside Ave. – commented that a direct route into marinas is necessary so trucks don’t come down Seaside Ave. Seaside Ave. is the Jewel of Westbrook but we have ugly, fast trucks that are dangerous. The Plan does not address this issue.

Ed Patenka – Island View Beach/Grove Beach – The criteria used for the recommendations included traffic congestion, a livable community and safety. Making an already congested area a “gathering place” is inconsistent with the notion of reducing congestion at that intersection and encouraging safety. He lives in that community and doesn’t “give a damn” about the people that will gather there but I do “give a damn” about the tax payers in this town. Cars have been broken into and broken bottles and needles are on the beach. He expressed concern about who will gather there and wander to the beach. His understanding is that one individual requested making that area a “gathering place” and how can we take it out?

Ms. VanBenschoten responded that this evening’s comments will get the “gathering places” out of the Plan/Study.

Darlene White – Seaside Ave. reported that she moved here because she loves the community and the local, friendly, businesses. She expressed concern regarding the vision for the marinas and “pop ups” including available parking.

Ms. VanBenschoten responded that these are just recommendations. The Town’s local Planning and Zoning Commissions would decide if it is a concept they want to pursue.

Ms. White reported that the area is already congested and suggested that there are other areas in Westbrook that may be more appropriate for those recommendations. She commented that it seems that things get decided during the winter when many beach residents are not in the area. She questioned who would vote on the Plan/Study?

Ms. VanBenschoten reported that the “pop up” concept is a recommendation for all 3 towns to consider. A process for summer residents needs to be worked out and this evening’s meeting is an opportunity to hear from everybody.

Mr. Gold reported that every town is represented by their First Selectman on the COG board. As mentioned earlier in the meeting, they can endorse recommendations but there is no requirement for them to do so. The goal is to get us to a place where towns are comfortable with the final version of the Plan/Study. For any locally funded projects, the Town would vote if town money was to be used. If town money is spent, all property owners have the right to vote on a budget. You can also reach out to your local representatives regarding any State or Federal money.

Butch Glaffy – Boston Post Road – expressed concern regarding “tightening areas around the Town Green” with regard to negotiating tractor trailers that haul boats. He was unsure if the usable mountable curbs would be conducive for drivers.

Mr. Moorehouse reported that truck turn templates are used in the design phase to ensure the large vehicles are able to make the corners.

Mr. Glaffy expressed opposition to the “pop ups” and commented that they are detrimental to the existing businesses, especially restaurants. They would not contribute to the tax base.

Regarding gathering areas, Mr. Glaffy reported that he owns a lot on Hammock Road. He allows people to use the property but unfortunately, they abuse it (litter, etc.). He was concerned the “gathering places” would require additional police patrols and maintenance through the Town’s Public Works Dept.

Mr. Glaffy expressed concern about the Singing Bridge area and possible reconfiguration of the access to Bill’s Seafood. He reported that area businesses use roadways to get their boats into their businesses. Old Boston Post Road is not wide enough now to accommodate delivery trucks. More traffic funneled into that area is not conceivable. Additionally, there are 3 residents on that street; houses with children and families. The traffic is bad enough now. This proposed recommendation will not work.

Rosemary – Bellstone Ave. – asked if the Selectman votes yes, do we have to adopt the entire plan or just a portion of it?

Mr. Gold responded that the Town will have to decide what, if any, recommendation(s) they feel are compatible with what they want to pursue. The Town will need to have their own local discussions about priorities. Again, the Town has control over Zoning but the Town should take a position regarding the State Right of Way (not owned by the Town).

Rosemary – Do we need to endorse the Plan/Study to received Federal funding?

Mr. Gold - if the Town says they don't want these suggested improvements, when it comes to funding, Westbrook will not be rated highly by the DOT. The State has a backlog of projects and will take their money elsewhere.

Ms. VanBenschoten reported that this is a Study/Plan only. It is a series of recommendations made to help with a Vision. The Town has the ability to pick and choose projects regardless of this Plan/Study being endorsed or not. There is no project, at this time, which is imminent. We just looked at projects that *might* be considered. The Town can pick and choose or take portions of it.

Eva Powel ,Old Boston Post Road, expressed concern about cutting off access to Bill's Seafood one Rte. 1. This action will directly affect her and her family. The road is already congested. She was unable to understand how a road that is barely 2 cars wide will be able to accommodate Rte. 1 traffic. She continued that there is also a kayak/canoe launch at the marina and safety would be an issue. Her 10 year old son is currently unable to ride bike during business hours. She urged the COG to remove this item from the Study/Plan.

34 Bellstone Ave. commented on the bike safety going over the Singing Bridge. She felt it would be unsafe to have a bike lane in that area along with "pop ups".

Mr. Gold reported that the concept of "pop ups and food trucks" was an idea to use the vacant lots in the summer (these lots are used in the winter to store boats) in the marina district. Before they would be approved, the appropriate Zoning would have to be studied and considered.

Ms. Davies commented on the lessons learned regarding outreach to the beach community. The beach communities are now included in the COG's Public Participation Policy.

Mr. Gold reported that the beach community will be included in their notices and they encourage residents to pass the information on to their neighbors, especially during the winter month.

The meeting adjourned at 9:26 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Suzanne Helchowski
Recording Clerk