

## **Alternatives eyed to ease bridge traffic**

### ***Seacoast planners say Little Bay is top priority***

**By Clare Kittredge, Globe Correspondent | September 5, 2004**

Bill Burtis admits that his idea of running ferries across the Piscataqua River may be one of the more whimsical proposals for easing traffic congestion at the Spaulding Turnpike's worst choke point.

"My pet project is ferryboats from Portsmouth to Dover," said Burtis, whose office overlooks downtown Portsmouth. "I don't know whether it's practical. It does get people interested in looking at this in a bigger way. It's the old thinking outside the box thing."

Burtis, who commutes across the bridge daily from Lee, is one of many Seacoast residents trying to figure out how to unsnarl traffic across the Little Bay Bridge from Newington to Dover Point. He works for Clean Air-Cool Planet, a Portsmouth-based regional environmental group focused on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and recently launched a new grass-roots group, "Citizens for a Better Bridge."

The Seacoast Metropolitan Planning Organization, which will meet at 7 p.m. Thursday at Portsmouth City Hall, considers the issue its top priority, said chairman Bob Landman. And the group opposes expanding the bridge to eight lanes.

"I-95 is only three lanes each direction all the way to Boston. Why four lanes just across from Newington to Dover?" said Landman. "I'd like to see three lanes each way, no more, and more public transportation. You can't keep adding lanes, because by 2025, the traffic will be as jammed as it is now."

Stretching across the body of water that joins the Piscataqua River to Great Bay, the Little Bay Bridge squeezes traffic from six lanes to four (total lanes north-south), routinely bringing rush-hour traffic on the Spaulding Turnpike to a standstill.

Divided into two, two-lane piers built on the same foundation, the Little Bay Bridge stands next to the old General Sullivan Bridge, a 1930s era bridge now deemed unsafe for cars, but used by cyclists and pedestrians.

Half-hour traffic jams routinely clog the northbound side of the bridge during afternoon rush hour; southbound traffic seizes up during the morning commute.

That's because roughly 70,000 cars a day churn across the bridge (total both ways), a number projected to increase to over 100,000 a day by 2025, according to Christopher Waszczuk, state Department of Transportation manager for the Newington-Dover project.

"The roadway is at capacity in morning and evening peak hours," Waszczuk said.

The state is involved in a \$120 million long-range project to improve traffic flow on the bridges, funded with federal and state transportation dollars.

"The Rockingham Planning Commission feels that finding an efficient solution to transportation in

this corridor is the most important transportation decision on the Seacoast," said Chris Cross, chairman of a task force advising the state on the project, the Newington-Dover Advisory Task Force.

Next month, the state will issue a report recommending its top three choices for further study, Cross said. The state has weighed 12 to 15 options, from double-decker bridges to tunnels to get across the bay, but discarded most, said Cross. A tunnel would be too expensive and intrusive on each end, and a double-decker bridge would be too visible and tough to build, Cross said.

Cross said the state's top choices probably would include adding lanes to the two existing bridges, removing the older bridge and expanding the newer one, or tearing down both bridges and building a new one. All options expand the bridge to six or eight lanes, said Cross.

The state plans to make a preliminary recommendation to state transportation commissioner Carol Murray next year, and a final decision by 2008, Cross said.

If all state and federal permits are granted, the state wants building to start in 2008 as well, said Waszczuk.

Waszczuk said it is premature for critics to say the state wants to expand the bridge to eight lanes. "It's still too early in the process to say we're leaning in that direction," he said. "I would say we're looking at all the options."

But Citizens for a Better Bridge, which meets later this month on the issue, says it wants to make sure the state focuses more on beefing up public transportation and other alternatives.

"New Hampshire along with the six New England states signed a climate agreement to reduce carbon emissions with pretty specific goals," said Burtis. "It's going to be harder to meet those goals if we keep building bigger roads as the only solution."

Cross, the Rockingham Planning Commission's representative to his task force, said his group is split on the eight-lane issue.

"This is a major transportation artery and a gateway to the entire eastern New Hampshire," said Cross.

Studies by a state traffic consultant show that eight lanes are needed to handle rush-hour traffic at the bridge, said Cross. "However, other groups feel traffic management could reduce that."

"Some people say if you build a wide road, you get more cars. Others say if you build narrow roads, you get people to use other alternatives," said Cross. "But it's unlikely the public will accept a decision that continued gridlock is acceptable as a way of forcing people into buses." ■