

New Hampshire Statewide Rest Area and Welcome Center Study

Public Information Meeting Report

Seabrook, NH

January 5, 2016

State Agency Staff attending: Study Manager Roger Appleton, NHDOT; Director of Travel and Tourism Development Victoria Cimino and Bureau Chief, Jennifer Codispoti, DRED.

Consultants attending: Jeffrey Maxtutis, AECOM; Carol Morris, Morris Communications.

Public Attendees: Nine members of the public signed in, including Senator Nancy Stiles, and Cliff Sinnott and David Walker of Rockingham Regional Planning Commission.

The meeting opened at 4:05 pm.

Director Cimino opened the meeting by welcoming the group and making introductions. She noted that providing services in the state Welcome Information Centers is a partnership between DOT and DRED, as DOT owns the land and the centers are managed and staffed by DRED. DRED began managing the facilities in FY12, to take advantage of the agency's expertise in tourism marketing. She explained that the budget is \$3 million, with \$1.7 coming from the Highway Fund and \$1.3 million from Turnpike funds. She talked about the number of facilities available and their hours, and noted that a pilot program was started in mid-December to reopen the seasonally closed facilities. She explained that the study overall will help inform a strategic plan that will better manage the state's Rest Areas/Welcome Information Centers.

Jeffrey Maxtutis provided an overview of the study's progress, saying it began a year ago with a goal of assessing traveler uses and needs, identifying needed improvements, and recommending the appropriate number, size and location of Rest Areas/Welcome Information Centers. He noted that data collection has included an extensive inventory of traffic and parking data, visitor counts, driver surveys, and focus groups with tourism representatives and Legislators, along with input from the trucking industry.

He noted that this was the final of five public meetings to collect input.

Maxtutis then reviewed the location and availability of 16 facilities throughout the state. He showed the annual and seasonal foot traffic numbers for each and noted that the statewide system overall has over three million annual visitors. This does not include the new Hooksett centers, which appear to be generating very strong initial numbers.

He reviewed industry guidelines on the spacing of centers: there should be 60 miles or 1 hour between stopping opportunities. Based on this, I-89 and I-95 meet guidelines, as does the south segment of I-93; Northern New Hampshire does not meet guidelines.

Jennifer Codispoti then provided a brief overview of the centers in this region, which are Salem and Seabrook. Salem, built in 1994, is one of the larger and newer facilities at about 5,500 square feet, with a separate vending building, truck parking, four full-time and five to seven part-time employees. Salem is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The Seabrook facility is similar in size and was built in 1999. It also has four full-time and seven part-time employees and a separate vending building. This facility will be updated starting this spring in a joint project with DOT, at which time the rest room area will be updated and the building exterior will be painted.

Maxtutis then talked about the study's driver survey results, noting that they captured information on trip purpose, reason for stopping and suggested improvements. He noted that almost half stopped to use the rest room, and the second most needed service was traveler information. Travelers would most like to see Wi-Fi and electronic device charging stations.

There was some discussion about survey methodology and how the "other" category was handled.

At this point meeting attendees were asked if they had comments or questions. Carol Morris asked each attendee to make comments to get started. A summary of major topics and concerns is below:

Closed Centers

- There was concern about the closed rest areas – can they be reopened in a fiscally responsible way, perhaps one by one. Comments in particular about Rumney catering to the kayaking, snowmobiling, picnicking audience, noting that it was generally rural rest areas on east-west routes that were closed. These areas rely on tourism and recreation and it important to try to reopen them if possible. Suggestions were made that non-profits (snowmobile associations) in the area could potentially help via Trails Bureau grants for parking and plowing costs. Volunteers would also be available. In regards to the closed Epsom facility on Rte. 4, an attendee added that there is a great fishing spot behind the facility and the state Fish and Game Department could take over that spot to educate the public.

Amenities

- There was agreement among many that Wi-Fi is essential to provide more value to younger customer base. It was noted that there is less need for brochure rack space due to the above – people just want maps, charging stations, Wi-Fi and bathrooms. It was recommended to plan for this when the state allocates space

in the rest areas. (Cimino noted that the majority of the NH Division of Travel and Tourism marketing is digital.)

- A recommendation was made to not be afraid to charge for things such as internet or electric car charging stations and to try to plan ahead for sufficient number of stations. Showers are another item that is charged for at locations in places such as Germany.
- The suggestion was made by several to explore the idea of placing an electric car charging facility here. Strong agreement that this will be needed for cars other than Teslas. CNG is now available in Massachusetts. In general, the recommendation to look at alternative technologies was strong.
- It was suggested that Seabrook is a good location for greetings and information, but would it be possible to combine other services with the State Liquor Store up the road, to have operational facilities and expanded services there. In general, the suggestion was to offer travel and other services as part of liquor stores statewide and generate income in that manner.

Trucking

- An emphasis was placed on the importance of facilities for truckers since I-95 is a freight corridor. Concerns were expressed about the lack of truck facilities in this major truck corridor; private facilities are overloaded and causing traffic problems. Auxiliary power services would be a recommended service as they allow truckers to turn off truck engines during rest stops.
- The Greenland truck facility is over-capacity.

Visitor Services

- A question was asked about the status of volunteers at the rest areas. New Hampshire uses the Granite State Ambassadors as volunteers; they do a great job in adding value and interacting with visitors. Volunteers cannot replace staff however due to Fair Labor Standards Act constraints.
- A suggestion was made to improve external signage to help travelers to know what to expect at each rest area.

Miscellaneous

- In regards to the update on the Seabrook facility, concerns were expressed about use of town water, water efficiency and storm water management best practices. It was noted that there is better technology and filtrations systems now than in 1999 and it was requested that this be a consideration. A suggestion was made to use waterless facilities and also that the toilets be self-flushing. Concern was also expressed about potential petroleum spills.

- Solar power for heating water is another energy efficient use that should be considered.
- It was noted that visitors have been declining at the Portsmouth Visitor Center because of hand-held electronic devices.
- A question about why the new Hooksett rest area can't be a model for the rest of the state facilities was responded to with the following: In 1956, commercialization was banned on federally funded highways, with the caveat that the only pay services could be vending machines and pay phones, with travel information added later. Hooksett is on a toll-funded road – the Turnpike, so it is exempt from this law. All other state facilities are not exempt.
- Discussion took place about the Newburyport park-and-ride facilities and how do we compete – general feeling is that the need is there and Newburyport is maxed out now.
- Concerns were expressed about a potential capacity issue at Seabrook.
- Suggestions were made for directional signage inside the Seabrook rest area; this could be a revenue generator, as developers would pay for this low-key advertising. Suggestions for an electronic kiosk that could forward information to a personal device were made, with the comment that this could also be useful for travelers and generate revenue.
- It was asked how much it would cost to upgrade all the buildings. *(It was noted that this would be part of the report.)*
- The survey data broken down by facility was requested by several attendees in order to help them understand visitor patterns for their area.
- Codispoti closed by stating that comments will be taken through January 15 and can be emailed to wic.study@dred.nh.gov

The meeting closed at 5:15 pm.