

New Hampshire Statewide Rest Area and Welcome Center Study

Public Information Meeting Report

Lebanon, NH

December 8, 2015

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: 8 people signed in; 9 attended, plus a representative from the *Valley News*

The meeting opened at 5:35 pm.

Director Cimino opened the meeting by welcoming the group and explaining that the series of public meetings were for the purpose of hearing feedback to set a strategic plan to manage the state's rest areas and welcome information centers. She said there were five public input sessions planned in total and this would be the third. She also noted that providing services in the centers is a partnership between state agencies, as DOT owns the land and they are managed by DRED. She compared this to DOT being the landlord and DRED being the tenant. DRED's focus is on providing services that visitors need and want and also making sure that state funding is utilized efficiently.

Jeffrey Maxtutis provided an overview of the study, reiterating that the goal is to assess traveler uses and needs, identify needed improvements, and recommend the appropriate number, size and location of Rest Areas/Welcome information Centers. He noted that the study had begun in January 2015 and data collection has included an extensive inventory of traffic and parking data, visitor counts, driver surveys, focus groups with tourism representatives and Legislators, along with input from the trucking industry.

An evaluation of best practices in other states is also taking place.

Maxtutis then reviewed the upcoming meeting schedule and 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 center.

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 Lebanon and Springfield. Lebanon is one of the older centers, built in 1966. It is about 1,400 to 1,500 square feet and is staffed by part-time employees. It is a seasonal center; only open part of the year. *(It will be part of an upcoming pilot program in which three seasonal centers will stay open longer, December-March.)* The Springfield center is one of the most modern in the system, with a beautiful and panoramic view. It is about 6,000 square feet and is open 12 hours a day year round.

Maxtutis then talked about the driver survey results, noting that they captured information on trip purpose, reason for stopping and suggested improvements and providing an overview of these results. He told the group that there was little difference in responses among the centers.

At this point meeting attendees were asked if they had comments or questions. Carol Morris asked each attendee to make comments to get started.

WIC Study

- Several questions were asked during the session about the study process: had the state police been interviewed (yes), were driver surveys done on weekends (yes), were driver surveys done in winter (no), were employees surveyed (not formally but communication is constant), what states were being used as comparison for best practices (Arizona, Virginia, Utah, New York, Vermont, Maine, Massachusetts).
- There was general agreement that using data to make decisions is a good thing, and so this study is appreciated.

Amenities/Services

- It was asked if private food vendors could be allowed at the rest areas. Maxtutis explained that most rest areas were built on federally funded roads, with federal funding, and when that is the case, they are not allowed to compete with local businesses. In those cases, only a limited number of services can be offered: rest rooms, vending machines, tourist information and the like.
- It was noted that as the general population ages there will be a greater need for rest room facilities.

Visitor Services

- A suggestion about using a variable message sign to warn about the “microclimate” at the Springfield rest area would increase driver safety.
- A question was asked about the feasibility of using volunteers at rest areas. Codispoti explained that the Granite State Ambassadors program is being

expanded, but while this may improve the quality of services, the program cannot effectively substitute for paid employees due to labor laws.

Closed Centers

- If closed centers cannot be reopened, they should at least be cleaned up. Epsom looks terrible. The lawn at least should be mowed. Roger Appleton said that they are holding off on taking any actions on closed centers until study results are completed.
- It is very bad for NH tourism that the first rest area people come to (Lebanon) is closed in winter. It makes it very hard for local businesses to market themselves to visitors. NH does not seem committed to supporting the tourism industry.
- There was interest in terms of whether opening and shutting rest areas several times a year is cost effective; Cimino noted that 70 percent of the cost of the rest areas is personnel cost.

Trucking

- Trucks need a place to stop, and with the new hands free law, people need a place to pull over as well. People need a place to use the rest rooms – waiting until Sutton is not acceptable. The rest areas in Epsom and Rumney were well used and are needed for people driving to Maine. There are no east-west rest stops and that is a problem.

Partnerships

- There was support for potential public private partnerships, especially in this region. The agencies were encouraged to contact Dartmouth College, which gets thousands of visitors yearly and would likely be interested in talking about some kind of partnering.

Location

- Interstate 89 is the gateway to NH and the seacoast* and should be utilized as a marketing opportunity. * For people entering the state from VT/I-89.
- There are some very good rest areas (Hooksett and Springfield) but they are all northbound. The state needs something of similar quality going southbound*
*There is a Hooksett Southbound facility on I-93 5 miles south of I-89.
- It was asked if it would be possible to open any new information centers once study results were in. Cimino said it is too soon to know the answer to that.

Miscellaneous

- The rest areas improve safety but it is difficult to measure their impact on reducing accidents.
- It was suggested that since DOT has already created a road classification system that tiers the importance of state roads, perhaps that could be helpful in prioritizing the need for rest areas. Those that are on major arterials (Interstates 93, 89, 95) into the state should be kept and ensure a good first impression: Hooksett, Seabrook, Salem, Lebanon.
- An attendee noted that people in the area appreciated the agencies' challenge of trying to provide services with state budget constraints, and stated that the region is available to provide verbal help and support in getting funding changes should that be needed.
- It was noted that capital improvements for the Lebanon center had been identified at one point.

The meeting closed at 6:30 pm.