

New Hampshire Statewide Rest Area and Welcome Center Study

Public Information Meeting Report

Keene, NH

December 3, 2015

State Agency Staff attending: Commissioner Jeffrey Rose and Bureau Chief Jennifer Codispoti, DRED; Study Manager Roger Appleton, State Maintenance Engineer Caleb Dobbins, District 4 Engineer John Kalifel, NHDOT.

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

The meeting opened at 3:35 pm.

Commissioner Jeffrey Rose 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. He also noted that this is a partnership, as DOT owns the land and they are managed by DRED. The rest areas are funded by Legislative appropriation to the DOT and managed by DRED. He noted this was the second of five sessions, and comments would be accepted through January 15. The rest areas are important to visitors but it is important to make sure 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 Antrim Welcome Center, which was closed in 2011. A gentleman asked why the center was closed.

Maxtutis then talked about the driver survey results, noting that the response rate was 15%, which is considered good. They captured information on trip purpose, reason for stopping and suggested improvements. 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 to go around the room so people could tell where they were from and why they were here, but first she asked Roger Appleton to explain why Antrim was among the rest areas closed. He explained that DOT looked at cost to keep each rest area open, amount of traffic as well as other facilities available in the area. He noted that that is why the agencies are here today, to hear issues for both open and closed rest areas.

Closed Centers

- Concerns centered around the Antrim facility being an eyesore, there is nowhere for trucks to park or people to stop along that whole stretch of road. This is also a location where many serious crashes occur year round – perhaps if people had a place to stop that would help.
- Consensus that NH is supposedly a tourist-oriented state and the message that a closed rest area gives is very negative.
- There was discussion about why the closed rest areas need to look so bad. Local volunteers could cut the grass and pick up trash. Many people felt that local volunteers could also help out with other duties and take the burden off the state. Local people want their state to look good and New Hampshire is suffering by comparison. Caleb Dobbins responded that there are liability issues as well as the problem of increasing customer expectations that cannot be met under existing budget.
- There was a local impact on the smaller restaurants and B&Bs when Antrim was closed – these are often off the beaten path and have no easy way to get information out.
- The Antrim rest area also provides access to an adjacent historical and recreational site.
- A Peterborough chamber representative reiterated the need for the Antrim rest area by itemizing the large number of regional maps (and toilet paper) provided by his office in the last 6 weeks to visitors. People were encouraged to contact their legislators directly on these issues.
- It was noted that ten years ago Antrim septic needed replacing, and other repairs totaling \$1M.

Trucking

- The closing of Antrim also meant even fewer places for trucks to stop and many have had to reroute so as to have a place to stop. This has significantly affected the ability to get deliveries in this area.
- It was noted that truck parking will no longer be allowed at Mr. Mikes in Hillsborough.

Location

- Looking at the map, it is clear that this is an isolated area and that there is need for tourism support.
- There was a request that functioning rest areas be placed near Peterborough, near Keene, between Concord and Keene and between Keene and Brattleboro.
- A new prime location in Hillsborough is available (for sale) at intersection of Rte. 9 and 31, empty barn with two septic systems.
- It was suggested that combining a different location with a good location for car-pooling would make sense.
- The Franklin Pierce Homestead is in Hillsborough, has historical significance, and could be linked to a new welcome information center.
- It was noted the Chesterfield Gorge State Park visitor center was not enough for the region, on the wrong side of the road, and not available to truckers.

Partnerships

- The state abandoned* Chesterfield Gorge State Park in 2004 – but in 2009 a group of volunteers got together and helped to clean it up; and the Parks Division stepped in in 2013 and put in a bathroom, cut trees, etc. This is a success story and a model for local community partnerships, perhaps starting with a “Friends of Antrim Rest Area” organization.
*The state did not abandon this property.
- The DECCA group at the high school (a business education/marketing group) would also be very interested in volunteering in a rest area. It was noted that the retirees who worked at the site were excellent and a great resource.
- It was suggested that if looking at reopening or opening a new facility, two cost estimates should be done: one for a fully state-run facility and one as a partnership or partially privatized. There is lots of opportunity for collaboration in the region.
- It was noted that the MA Central Chamber operates a rest area from the state and sells food and gifts.

Amenities/Services

- A reopened or relocated Antrim rest area would be a great place to get information and to take a break and walk, rest or eat lunch at the picnic table.

Not to buy food but just to take a break. Wifi services would be great. It is not always safe to pull over by the side of that road to take a call and so allowing people to stop at the rest area would be very helpful. Relocation requests have increased in the area and this should be included as well. It was noted that flyers are very effective in introducing travelers to local businesses.

Miscellaneous

- It was noted that when these rest areas were built, the state was a different place – the Monadnock region was not losing people and jobs. We are missing an opportunity to determine what is needed in the world today. The focus on economic development and jobs in the Hooksett centers would be excellent to have here in the Monadnock region.
- There was significant discussion about how the rest areas are funded, how funding is inadequate, other state funding sources and funding challenges. There was support for reallocating funding.
- A question was asked as to whether any money could be shifted within DRED to add more money to the rest area budget. Codispoti responded that existing program monies were already accounted for and in many cases, program dollars cannot be shifted between programs.
- Several attendees encouraged everyone to think of new funding ideas – each town already gets a portion of the rooms and meals tax, for example and decides town by town what to do with it. Dobbins noted there is a facility in Vermont that got funding for different environmental/sustainable activities.
- It was asked why the highway historical signs had been moved at rest areas, even in ones that were not closed.
- Discussion of funding sources and limited DOT budget stemming from 1992 level gas tax. Cost of products and services have gone up, but tax remains the same*.
*July 1, 2016, the gas tax was increased by 4.2 cents.
- It was noted that truck parking will no longer be allowed at Mr. Mikes in Hillsborough.

The meeting closed at 4:55 pm.