

New Hampshire Statewide Rest Area and Welcome Center Study

Public Information Meeting Report

Lancaster, NH

December 15, 2015

State Agency Staff attending: Assistant Commissioner Bill Cass, Assistant Director of Operations David Rodrigue and Study Manager Roger Appleton, DOT; Commissioner Jeffrey Rose, 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: 26 people signed in, including various area legislators, a Coos County commissioner and area town officials. Representatives from three media outlets also attended.

The meeting opened at 5:08 pm.

Assistant Commissioner Cass opened the meeting by welcoming the group and explaining that this and other public meetings were for the purpose of gathering input as part of the study process to set a strategic direction to manage the state's rest areas and welcome information centers, and to provide information on the appropriate size, number and location of rest areas going forward into the future. He provided background into the history of the rest areas, noted that in FY12 DOT and DRED entered into an agreement relative to operations and that DRED's focus is on providing customer services that visitors need and want compared to DOT's focus on maintenance. He said the customer service aspect is a major aspect of the study. He then introduced Commissioner Rose, who went on to say that DOT owns the land and DRED manages the centers, comparing this to DOT being the landlord and DRED being the tenant. He believes that the synergies between the two agencies are positive and that the rest areas are very important to the entire state and especially to the North Country. He noted a new pilot project that will keep the seasonal centers open during the winter, which reflects that importance. He also noted that earlier in the study, focus group meetings with specific groups such as truckers, tourism representatives and legislators took place.

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 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, not including the Hooksett rest area. He noted they had done a visitor survey and he would go into details on that later.

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; the north I-93 segment, Canterbury to Littleton, does not meet guidelines.

Jennifer Codispoti then provided a brief overview of the five centers in this region, which are Colebrook, Intervale (North Conway), Littleton, Rumney and Shelburne. Colebrook was built in 1970 with an original size of 700 square feet. An addition was completed in 1995 and another one in 2002. The facility is open 12 hours daily May-October, staffed by part-time employees. DRED works with the North Country Chamber of Commerce and the Upper Connecticut Valley Community Coalition assist with information and exhibits in the Interpretive Room. The Littleton center was built in 1988 and is 1,800 square feet, run by five part-time employees. The Littleton Chamber has a space with area specific information. Intervale Scenic Overlook, or North Conway, was built in 2007. It is one of the larger centers at 6,000 square feet. Open five days a week for eight hours a day, it employs one full-time and four part-time employees. The Rumney welcome center was built in 1987. It is 1,000 square feet and was closed in 2011. Codispoti went on to say that the final rest area, Shelburne, was built in 1968 with an addition put on in 1995. It is 700-800 square feet. It was closed in 2012. She noted that the facility needs a new septic system, the expense of which was one of the reasons it was closed.

A discussion ensued as to what funding had been put into Shelburne before it was closed, and Assistant Commissioner Cass explained that the closure of all rest areas in 2011-2012 was not based on a long-term plan, but on state budget shortfalls that needed to be addressed with swift action. The closing of and need for a Shelburne rest area was the focus of a considerable number of questions and concerns during the presentation.

Maxtutis noted that a history of the physical condition of each facility is part of the study. He then talked about the driver survey results, noting that results were strong with a 15% response rate, and providing details on trip purpose, reason for stopping and suggested improvements. He told the group that responses for the centers were quite consistent among the centers, with little regional differences.

At this point meeting attendees were asked if they had comments or questions. Carol Morris asked each attendee to talk about what brought them here in order to get the group started with the discussion. Discussion was lively and centered around the below topics:

WIC Study

- It was asked if legislators would get a briefing prior to the release of the final report. (Yes.)

Tourism

- A very strong emphasis on the region's extreme dependence on tourism. Many people come through but are unaware of what there is to do in the area – and there is so much. Economic development is the direct result of these centers. There are 18 million visitors annually to the White Mountain region.
- There seems to be a disconnect with the fact that tourism is the most important economic driver here but 50% of the year-round centers have been closed and 2/3rds of the seasonal centers. They are very happy about the pilot program to reopen the seasonal centers in the winter.
- Canadians are a very important group and they need a “welcome mat” when they come into the state.
- Tourism is the only economy here. The North Country has lost half its population and needs economic development.
- In addition, there was much discussion about how the North Country is never going to be able to compete with other regions in terms of outright numbers – but if you look at the numbers that pass through in proportion to the number of residents, it highlights the importance of visitors.

Closed Centers

- The look of the closed centers is bad for NH and bad for tourism – especially in Shelburne as people see a closed facility as they come into the state for the first time. It is an embarrassment. The state needs to put its best foot forward.
- The Town of Gorham saw a very large increase in the seasonal town information booth visitors after Shelburne closed. It would be best to reopen it, but if it cannot reopen, more should be done with the Gorham facility.
- Shelburne does not have to be at that location. Long term, a partnership could be created with state liquor stores to include public bathrooms and access to area tourism materials.
- There was concern noted that Shelburne was not part of the pilot program.
- It was asked whether the Shelburne facility could be reopened and why it was not included as part of the pilot program to expand seasonal hours. (DRED

reported it would require approximately \$300,000 to re-open the facility. NHDOT noted that ADA improvements would also need to be made in order for reopening to occur.)

Trucking

- Route 2 is the east-west highway and is a big economic driver. It needs rest areas. Shelburne is a critical location for truckers to pull safely over and rest as required by law. Colebrook attracts ATVers and snowmobilers all winter – again, a key economic driver for the region.
- The only other industry is logging, which means trucks that require legally required places to park and rest.
- Rest areas are simply vital for trucks here. These trucks cannot just pull off the road or in parking lots. If DRED can't reopen Shelburne, can trucks at least park in the parking lots, can the barriers please be removed?

Partnerships

- The Northern Scenic Byway Council and US Fish and Wildlife/Conte Reservation would like to get back into the Colebrook center, where they participated for years.
- There is a strong desire to partner with DRED by municipalities and the county to reopen the closed information centers. This is how important this is to Coos County and its future. They are willing to invest in this. Is it possible to get state and federal dollars out of the Shelburne area so the municipalities can take over? It was noted that in the past, public-private partnerships have been discussed and people are willing, but there seem to be encumbrances to these everywhere. We have got to get through these. *(It was noted that DRED is able to partner with chambers and they are interested in pursuing this discussion.)*

Amenities/Services

- There is frustration with lack of public restrooms in NH, which is especially difficult for older travelers. Clean, convenient rest areas should be available for all travelers as this leaves an important impression in visitors' memories.
- The Intervale information center is not open until 10 am – we want people to be in the attractions by 10 am.

Visitor Services

- Other rest areas in NH do not carry information about the North Country. And the facilities are not clean. We need to put out a good impression for NH.

Location

- It was noted that there is a lack of welcome and information centers on I-93 and blue attraction signs with no information.

Miscellaneous

- It was noted that the proposed Balsams project will generate demand for facilities.
- If areas are to be closed, can't DRED at least mow the lots and make the buildings look respectable? Now the lights have been removed as well. *(It was noted that removing the barriers and keeping the centers partly open creates expectations that they are 100 percent open. (This will be looked at as part of the study.)*
- It was asked how the original closing decisions were made. *(Geographic location (irrespective of numbers), parking (especially for truckers), and service facilities were all part of the equation.)*
- It was asked what the criteria for success in terms of the new pilot programs would be. *(The four criteria are foot traffic in comparison to forecast, cost, marketing potential and safety.)*

Discussions also included an explanation of the restrictions on revenue for the centers: Federal law states that on facilities on interstates (roads or facilities that were built with federal funding) can only offer vending machines, pay phones and limited tourism materials so as not to compete with private enterprise. Hooksett, located on a toll road (not funded acquired or constructed with federal funds) can offer the large range of services and revenue generators that it does. There was also a discussion of who runs the current vending machines (Services for the Blind) and whether they must do so or choose to do so. It is a federal requirement that the organization gets first refusal on the contract.

There were opinions expressed that other state funds could be allocated for these facilities, as DOT's funds are also allocated for road and bridge maintenance. It was noted by members of the legislative delegation that the rest areas are important, everyone agrees with that, but that this is a funding and revenue issue as most, if not all, funds are already allocated. It was noted by an attendee that a permanent long-term solution for funding is needed and it cannot come out of DOT funding, as roads and bridges are also very important to the region.

The meeting closed at 6:35 pm.