

Study first step to improve transportation island-wide

The Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, a regional agency fostering communication, coordination and consensus building

ARTHUR S. WEBER

working to improve transportation, traffic, and mobility on the island through the Aquidneck Island Transportation Study.

This is the first study to address the transportation needs of Aquidneck Island as a whole. It seeks to improve traffic congestion, mobility and safety through the development of specific projects that will have island-wide impacts. AIPC has worked closely with Newport, Middletown and Portsmouth to identify the island's transportation needs, and the final plan will benefit all three municipalities and their residents.

The goal is to create a plan for the island's transportation future with recommendations for short and long-term projects that will provide tangible benefits to its residents, commuters and visitors. The study encompasses all modes of transportation on the island, including automobiles, mass transit, cyclists and pedestrians. It views these not as separate, competing modes, but as complementary parts of a single, island-wide transportation system. Among the many issues the study is addressing are traffic signal timing, road reconfigurations, sidewalks, parking and improvements to make bicycling safer.

The study will have implications far beyond the island's roads and vehicles. By decreasing traffic congestion and providing a wider set of transportation choices to the island's residents, commuters and visitors, its recommendations can improve the island's economic viability, environment and quality of life.

The project is funded through grants AIPC received from the Federal Highway Administration, and distributed through state Department of Transportation and Statewide Planning Department. AIPC is managing the study, and through a stringent competitive bid process it has hired the transportation engineering firm Vanasse Hangen Brustlin to complete the plan. VHB brings substantial experience and expertise to the study, giving it the ability to execute the sophisticated data collection, traffic modeling, public outreach and alternatives development required for the study.

VHB works closely with the study's professional steering committee, which is composed of representatives from a broad set of federal, state and local stakeholders, including DOT, the island's city and towns, the Newport & Bristol County Convention & Visitors Bureau and the Sierra Club. The committee has guided the development of the

study's scope and goals, and it serves as an important source of information on local conditions and needs.

As with all AIPC projects, public participation is essential to producing a plan that best fits island needs. No one is more qualified to share their views on the current transportation system and how it might be improved than the island's residents, visitors and commuters. To date, more than 400 people have contributed their ideas and suggestions to the study by participating in public workshops, completing surveys and submitting comments through the project Web site (www.vhb.com/aquidneck).

As the study moves forward, public participation will remain crucial to its success. Those interested can submit comments through the study Web site at any time, and AIPC will hold two more public workshops.

Last month marked the halfway point of the transportation study, which began in July 2009. The first two phases of the project focused on information gathering and technical analysis phases, during which VHB collected and analyzed data on the island's existing transportation system through surveys, traffic modeling and mapping. Currently, AIPC and VHB are working with the steering committee and general public to develop a set of alternative recommendations for the island.

At the most recent public meeting on April 29 at the Community College of Rhode Island's Newport campus, participants helped develop a focused list of potential projects through interactive voting and breakout-discussion groups. By the close of the study, VHB, with public input, will create a list of final recommendations to the DOT for eventual federal funding of the projects, which will provide a much improved transportation system on the island.

AIPC is grateful to the Newport County Chamber of Commerce for use of this space and the opportunity to update the public on the progress of the Aquidneck Island Transportation Study.

We appreciate the input of those who have already participated in the study, and we encourage anyone else interested in the study to visit its website and to attend the next public workshop, which is planned for September.

Together, we can develop a transportation plan that improves mobility and quality of life for the island's residents, commuters and visitors.

Arthur S. Weber, chairman of the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, wrote this piece on behalf of the Newport County Chamber of Commerce, which provides this monthly column. For more information, log on to www.newportchamber.com.