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NEWPORT

New bridge-ramp plan gets a warm reception

The proposal is rolled out at a City Council workshop, and no objections are heard.

By Sean Flynn
Daily News staff

The Aquidneck Island Planning Commission may have broken the Gordian knot of Pell Bridge ramps and proposed ramps that no one has seemed to be able to agree on during the past 20 years.

Robert A. Smith, deputy chief engineer for the state Department of Transportation, presented the commission's propos-

al for reconfiguring the bridge ramps to the Newport City Council on Thursday night and heard no objections. That was a stark contrast to the previous presentations over the years.

The planning commission hired Vanasse Hangen Brustlin of Providence to develop a transportation plan for Aquidneck Island. The consulting firm worked closely with local and state officials to develop plans that could find broad-based support.

The council heard the DOT's presentation during a workshop, so they could not vote on the proposal. Mayor Stephen C. Waluk asked Smith to send the council a

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Do you support the latest proposal to reconfigure the ramps on and off the Pell Bridge in Newport?

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formal request for endorsement of the plan so it could be put on a docket for an upcoming meeting.

Tina Dolen, executive director of the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, said she was relieved by the council's reception of the plan and comments made by council members.

If the council votes positively, the state could begin the detailed engineering study and development of construction plans immediately, Smith said.

RAMP A6



This proposal by Vanasse Hangen Brustlin of Providence, which is working on a transportation study of Aquidneck Island, shows a two-way ramp from the Pell Bridge east to Halsey Street, just south of the city's public works garage. Halsey Street would be extended across Admiral Kalbfus Road behind the RK Newport Towne Center and would join Connell Highway near the city's wastewater treatment plant. There would be a new roundabout at Halsey Street and Admiral Kalbfus Road. The long exit ramp from Route 138 that bends north from the Pell Bridge, curves over Admiral Kalbfus Road and merges into the road across from Newport Grand would be eliminated. The proposal would require city approval to move forward.

Ramp

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It is important for the city and state to act soon, he said.

Several years ago, the state received \$5 million in Federal Highway Administration funding for the Pell Bridge ramp reconfiguration project through a congressional appropriation known as an "earmark." Senators and representatives use earmarks to direct specific appropriations toward particular projects, but they are currently in disfavor in Congress because of increasing budget deficits.

Not only is Congress putting a moratorium on new earmarks, it is proposing to reclaim past earmarks that remain unspent, Smith said. He said the \$5 million would pay for the two-year period of engineering and preparation of the construction documents, as well as obtaining the various rights of way needed for the project. If the money is lost, the project cannot begin anytime soon, he said.

All seven council members were present for Smith's presentation, and some of the council members were present for an Aquidneck Island Planning Commission presentation of the whole

transportation study early last month.

The commission and VHB developed 28 criteria to rank potential projects on the island as part of the study. Among 25 recommended projects on the island, the new plan for reconfiguring access to the Pell Bridge was the top-ranked project, Smith said.

While no one seems to like the way the Pell Bridge ramps currently are configured, it was difficult to come up with a plan that would handle heavy traffic flows, especially in the summer; eliminate the long ramp that is part of the so-called "road to nowhere," and not encroach on residential neighborhoods such as the Point.

Smith pointed out that a previous plan to construct an access road along the rail tracks near the Point ran into strong objections.

"To say the least," said Councilman Charles Y. Duncan, who represents the First Ward where the project is located.

The key difference between the newest plan and previous plans is a new two-way ramp from the bridge east to Halsey Street, just south of the city's public works garage. Halsey Street would be extended across Admiral Kalbfus Road behind the RK Newport Towne Center and would join Connell

Highway near the city's wastewater treatment plant. There would be a new roundabout at Halsey Street and Admiral Kalbfus Road.

A roundabout would replace the current rotary at Connell Highway and Admiral Kalbfus Road, west of the Halsey Street roundabout. A third roundabout would be constructed at the intersection of Admiral Kalbfus Road, Girard Avenue and Malbone Road, a dangerous intersection east of Halsey Street.

Roundabouts developed in Europe are smaller, tighter versions of the traditional American rotary, and are considered more efficient at moving traffic than traffic lights and stop signs, although traffic slows as it enters the roundabouts. All left-hand turns would be eliminated in the project area and the traffic light at Newport Grand would be eliminated, Smith said.

The long exit ramp from Route 138 that bends north from the Pell Bridge, curves over Admiral Kalbfus Road and merges into the road across from Newport Grand would be eliminated. Much to the confusion of some drivers, particularly those from outside the area, it looks like a section of the ramp goes straight — the so-called "road to nowhere," part of a proposed cross-

island parkway that never was built.

As in previous plans, Connell Highway would be connected between the current Admiral Kalbfus Road rotary and Farewell Street to the south. There would be bridge ramps to Connell Highway as the primary access points to and from the bridge.

The Halsey Street connection would answer concerns expressed by state transportation officials in the past about making Connell Highway the only access road for the bridge.

Council members asked Smith how much the whole project would cost, including the Halsey Street extension. Smith was reluctant to estimate since the detailed studies and preparation of construction documents have not begun yet. He used \$30 million as a ballpark figure, but stressed it was only a very rough estimate. Costs would be determined by the extent of the project, which also could be done in phases, he said.

Selling to developers the acres of land that would be freed up by eliminating long, looping ramps and the "road to nowhere" could help finance the project, he said.

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