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Island transportation study gains praise

By James A. Johnson
Daily News staff

NEWPORT — The final presentation of the Aquidneck Island Transportation Study brought few surprises Wednesday night for almost 150 people at the local campus of the Community College of Rhode Island.

Tina Dolen, executive director of the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, said that's because the project was a true community effort, based on more than 3,000 comments from area residents.

"This cohesive effort positions the island in a much better place than practically any other community in the state for transportation work," she said. "We put forward this design with the help of local, state and federal agencies in order to address the transportation needs of this island."

Michael Lewis, director of the state Department of Transportation, called it a "gem of a study" that represents the kind of effort that people can get passionate about.

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◆ Highlights of the Aquidneck Island Transportation Study. A8

"The important thing about this study is that it is not something that is being proposed by someone at DOT," Lewis said. "This is truly a community-based study."

Although it was the final public hearing for the \$500,000 study spearheaded by the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, public comment will be accepted online at www.vhb.com/aquidneck until Friday, May 23. A final report is expected by the end of May or early in June.

The 21-month study brought together the Federal Highway Administration, the state Department of Transportation and the Statewide Planning Program, in addition to local communities.

The project was explained in a PowerPoint presentation by William R. Ashworth, principal of transportation con-

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AT A GLANCE

Highlights of the Aquidneck Island Transportation Study:

Pell Bridge access:

◆ Reconfiguring the ramps to connect with Connell Highway, thereby removing the elevated highway over Admiral Kalbfus Road and freeing up land for development.

◆ Building a connector road east of Connell Highway and widening Connell Highway to four lanes from Admiral Kalbfus Road to the new connector.

◆ Turning the rotary at Connell Highway into a roundabout and building roundabouts at the new connector road and Girard Avenue.

Burma Road improvements:

Turning the road along the west side of the island into a two-lane, north-south corridor. Connections would be needed to existing roads at the north and south ends of Burma Road.

Two Mile Corner:

Reconstruct the intersection either by upgrading the traffic signals or adding roundabouts on West Main Road at East Main Road and Coddington Highway.

Other roundabouts:

◆ Middletown: On Valley Road at Aquidneck Avenue.

◆ Portsmouth: Three of them on East Main Road from Middle Road to Turnpike Avenue, as part of the Town Center project.

Island-wide bicycle network:

◆ Build a 10-mile Shoreline Bikeway next to Burma Road.

◆ Create shared-use paths on the side of West Main and East Main roads.

◆ The network could extend from the Pell Bridge to the Sakonnet River Bridge and include multi-modal centers at the Gateway Visitors Center in Newport and at Melville and Raytheon in Portsmouth.

Study

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sultants Vanasse Hangen Brustlin Inc. of Providence, which the planning commission hired for the study.

The study includes recommendations for reconfiguring the ramps to the Pell Bridge, upgrading Burma Road into a two-lane north-south connector road, improvements at Two Mile Corner, setting up a bicycle network on the island, adding roundabouts at several intersections throughout the island and improvements to bus transportation and pedestrian safety.

The study puts price tags on all the projects, but does not say from where the funding would come.

Lewis called funding a "tricky little issue."

"You can never get to that question unless you have the basics," the DOT director said. "Now you have the basics. You can start making decisions about a way to address these issues and in what period of time."

Local input set the highest priority on the changes to the Pell Bridge ramps, Ashworth said. The changes provide a direct connection between downtown Newport and Connell Highway. The removal of the elevated highway over Admiral Kalbfus Road would open up land for development. A new connector road across from Halsey Street and parallel to Girard Avenue, running behind the R.K. Towne Center, would allow traffic from the bridge to bypass the rotary and the traffic on Connell Highway.

The existing rotary would be converted into a roundabout, which slows traffic and increases safety, Ashworth said. Roundabouts would be installed on Admiral Kalbfus Road at the new connector and at Girard Avenue, which he called a high-accident intersection. A raised median would be built between the roundabouts, to prevent traffic from crossing.

Two choices for improving

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traffic flow at Two Mile Corner are under evaluation, he said.

Although the overall study already had been presented in each community, changes were made since the last presentation in Portsmouth. A proposal to widen Burma Road to four lanes has been eliminated and two projects already under consideration — the Town Center in Portsmouth and the Broadway streetscape in Newport — have been added to the transportation study.

Ashworth cited the impact and cost of widening Burma Road as reason for its elimination. As a result, East Main Road will remain four lanes.

The Town Center project along East Main Road from Portsmouth Town Hall to Turnpike Avenue would include widening the road, adding three roundabouts and installing sidewalks.

The Broadway streetscape would involve resurfacing Broadway from Equality Park Place to Farewell Street, installing bike lanes and angle parking and making Broadway one-way southbound between Marlborough and Farewell streets.

One resident called the intersection of Green End Avenue and Valley Road in Middletown "a bear and a half" and asked if any relief was in sight.

Ashworth said DOT is almost ready to award a contract to fix that intersection, which was listed in the study as one of the biggest bottlenecks on the island. He said he thought the project was slated for this summer.

In response to another question, Ashworth said the changes recommended in the study are designed to improve traffic flow on the island, even though no traffic lanes are being added.

"A lot of these improvements — adding left-turn lanes, synchronizing traffic lights, adding roundabouts, improving bus transportation, making people less dependent on the automobile — everything together will improve the overall transportation system on the island," he said.