

Lagoon Pond Drawbridge Committee Public Planning Session – December 7, 2005 Drawbridge Replacement Project Update

Held: Wednesday, December 7, 2005, 5:30 P.M., at the Oak Bluffs Library.

Hosted by: The Oak Bluffs Board of Selectmen, the Tisbury Board of Selectmen, the Martha's Vineyard Commission and the Lagoon Pond Drawbridge Committee

Attendance: Tisbury Board of Selectmen: Ray Laporte, Tom Pachico and Tristan Israel;
Oak Bluffs Board of Selectmen: Greg Coogan, Michael Dutton, Kerry Scott and Duncan Ross;
Martha's Vineyard Commission: Linda Sibley, Ned Orleans, John Breckenridge, Jim Powell, John Best, Deborah Pigeon, and Carlene Condon;
Drawbridge Committee: members Melinda Loberg, Mark London, Tristan Israel, Fred Lapiana, Steve Berlucchi, Jay Wilbur, Derek Cimeno, Dave Grunden and Richard Combra, Jr. as well as several people who have been participating in the Drawbridge Committee meetings with no official status: Harriet Barrow, Dan Greenbaum, Bob Ford, Chris Fried and Lois Craine;
Public safety officials from Oak Bluffs and Tisbury:
Chilmark Selectman: Warren Doty;
Senator Rob O'Leary's office: Sue Rohrbach;
Approximately thirty members of the public.

1. Presentation of the Situation

Drawbridge Committee Chairman Melinda Loberg presented a PowerPoint summary of progress regarding the existing bridge, the proposed temporary bridge, and the proposed permanent bridge. Planning is underway for the permanent replacement for the Lagoon Pond Drawbridge, a vital link in the main waterfront roadway connection between the Vineyard's three largest towns and is in a visually prominent location. See attachment for text representative of the PowerPoint presentation.

Drawbridge Committee member Fred LaPiana presented a brief summary of the November 2005 report *Beach Road Bridge over Lagoon Pond- Bridge Assessment*, by Lichtenstein Consulting Engineers, prepared for and funded by the Towns of Tisbury and Oak Bluffs.

- The Committee and towns were told by MassHighway of the urgency of action because of the risk of operational and structural failure, partly because of the instability due to the presence of an unstable peat layer. The engineer's report indicates no evidence of a peat layer.
- The concrete deck slab of the approach spans is at a high risk of failure. The engineer suggested possible repairs, either in small areas or replacing the whole deck. It had been suggested that it might be difficult to do a partial repair to the deck slabs because of the difficulty of finding solid

material although a District 5 engineer suggested that this could be possible. Liechtenstein suggested using ground-penetrating radar to test soundness.

- The draw span might get stuck. The bascule span joints are at a high risk of failure. The span could be cut again, as has been done previously, in order to make a better fit.
- Liechtenstein also itemized a number of potential failures with low and moderate risk, along with repair suggestions.
- Liechtenstein suggested that reducing the load and speed limits could help extend the life of the bridge.
- The Committee would like MassHighway to execute these repairs and preventive measures as soon as possible. According to MassHighway, there are problems with repairing the pile caps; repairs would be costly and would take a long time. It might be possible to do the design now, so that those repairs could be made more quickly, in the event of failure. The Committee was encouraged by communications with District 5 and will further discuss these issues with the Boston office.

Mark London said that he had received word earlier in the day to the effect that Representative Delahunt had succeeded in obtaining an earmark for the construction of the permanent drawbridge. Although it was for a small amount, it represented a commitment from his office to ensure timely construction of the permanent drawbridge.

2. Questions and Comments from the Public

The rest of the meeting was made up of a series of comments from members of the public, sometimes followed by clarifications from members of the Drawbridge Committee.

Existing Bridge

- Do we know how much longer the life of the bridge could be extended by reducing speed and load limits? A member of the Drawbridge Committee responded that we don't.
- Repairs should be encouraged.
- The bridge is not in such bad shape; the ratings are 3s and 4s (on a scale of 10), not 1s and 2s
- If the bridge draw mechanism fails, the Coast Guard will presumably require that the bridge remain open to boats and closed to vehicular traffic. Some questioned whether or not the Coast Guard could be persuaded to close the bridge to boats, noting the issues with emergency vehicles, particularly for access to the hospital; it is 1.8 miles to the hospital from Vineyard Haven via Beach Road and 6 miles if you have to go around; this could be a matter of life and death. An alternative opinion was expressed that the cars can drive around, and that the only ambulance issues are from downtown Vineyard Haven to the hospital; that for all others the distance would be the same. There was response from Drawbridge Committee members that the Coast Guard would not likely agree in advance to close the bridge to boats, although there is hope that public pressure after an extended closure could convince them to reopen the bridge to vehicular traffic. The Drawbridge Committee would like to prepare an alternative safety plan for boats in the harbor, which might encourage the Coast Guard to relent.

- One Drawbridge Committee member stated that the bridge was in poor condition twenty years ago, and now is in terrible condition. The concrete structure has been contaminated by salt and some parts are hollow; Liechtenstein said all the decking should be replaced; the timber piles and especially the caps are in bad shape, even with the restraining repairs a few years ago, the bridge is still moving, there are problems with the bascule. He is not in favor of depending on it for 6-8 years, is in favor of proceeding with the temporary bridge in order to ensure safe, reliable transportation.
- According to the consulting engineer, the bridge would last longer if it could be closed permanently to boats (by welding shut), and the draw no longer operated.

Proposed Temporary Bridge

- The proposed design would not function well for pedestrian, bicycle and moped safety, especially because there are no shoulders. A Drawbridge Committee member said that MassHighway is looking at the possibility of widening the bicycle/pedestrian accommodations, especially on the approaches.
- The aesthetics would not work for the Vineyard. The proposed structure would look like an erector set in Yosemite Park.
- MassHighway's cost estimate has increased from \$2 million to \$6 million. They haven't changed the plans one iota since they first came two years ago.
- There was a suggestion to use a pontoon bridge temporarily, along with hauling larger boats over the barrier beach. Others suggested difficulties with this suggestion, including problems with operating the lift with anything other than very small waves, the legal liability of transporting boats on lifts, the need for extensive dredging, and permitting issues associated with the pontoons, which would block sunlight to the habitat below (including eelgrass beds).
- The temporary bridge should be at least as safe for pedestrians and bicyclists as the existing, which includes shoulders.

Permanent Bridge

- If the 1-bridge solution were to be used, the house (very close to existing bridge) would have to be taken. That should have been started long ago.
- There was a suggestion to revisit the potential of replacing the bridge with a tunnel.
- The design of the permanent bridge should have begun several years ago.
- MassHighway's cost estimate has increased from \$12 million to \$24 million.

Other

- MassHighway Commissioner Luisa Paiewonsky has agreed to come to the Island in January and meet with the Drawbridge Committee and other officials.
- Senator O'Leary's office is prepared to lend support to the community's efforts.

Note: As requested by the Oak Bluffs and Tisbury Boards of Selectmen, the Lagoon Pond Drawbridge Committee is coordinated by the Martha's Vineyard Commission and is made up of representatives of various town boards and of the community. Numerous documents relating to the project may be found on the MVC website (mvcommission.org). Call the Martha's Vineyard Commission with questions 508-693-3453

Minutes prepared by Jo-Ann Taylor and Mark London.

Lagoon Pond Drawbridge Replacement Project Update – December 2005

By Melinda Loberg and Mark London

Since MassHighway's replacement of the Lagoon Pond Drawbridge over the next few years will affect all of us, we wanted to give the Vineyard community an overview of where we are with this complex and controversial project. A public meeting co-sponsored by the Oak Bluffs and Tisbury Boards of Selectmen and the Martha's Vineyard Commission, with a lot more detail and an opportunity for discussion, will be held on Wednesday, December 7 at 5:30 p.m. in the Oak Bluffs Library.

MassHighway's plan is to install a temporary, pre-fabricated drawbridge between the existing bridge and the adjacent house, demolish the existing bridge, and a few years later, build a new, permanent bridge in the alignment of the existing bridge (the so-called "two-bridge solution"). An alternative plan that was discussed was to demolish or move the house and build the permanent bridge next to the existing bridge (referred to as the "one-bridge solution").

We will look at the status of each bridge in sequence: the existing, the temporary, and the permanent drawbridge.

The Existing Drawbridge

After several significant repairs and an attempt to design a major overhaul to the existing bridge, MassHighway concluded that it could not be saved. The bridge has been shifting for many years resulting in a risk that the lift mechanism will fail to work properly, the decking is in serious condition and pile caps are rated in poor condition. The engineers suspect deterioration of the wooden piles below the mudline.

Earlier this year, the Oak Bluffs and Tisbury Boards of Selectmen, on the advice of the Drawbridge Committee, hired Lichtenstein Consulting Engineers to analyze the existing bridge. They concluded that the bridge is presently safe to use but had reached its reasonable life expectancy. They identified twelve possible mechanisms that could make part or all of the bridge unusable. For each mechanism, they outlined either preventative repairs that could be carried out now to reduce the chance of failure, or contingency repairs that could be carried out should certain types of failure take place.

On November 21, Committee members met engineers from MassHighway's District 5 (responsible for bridge maintenance) to discuss the report. They will review it in more detail in cooperation with MassHighway's Bridge Section in Boston and let us know in January what measures they foresee taking. They said that, if warranted, they could carry out some modest repairs this spring and will set up a more sophisticated system to monitor small movements in the bridge structure, a sign that more aggressive action might be needed. They said that certain repairs, such as to specific areas of the bridge's decking, would only be done if they start to fail. They also indicated that they would not consider more significant suggested actions, such as replacing the entire decking or repairing the caps of the piles, because these would be very costly, lengthy, disruptive, and are not warranted given that the temporary bridge would be in place relatively soon.

The Temporary Drawbridge

MassHighway gave two basic reasons for its plan to build a temporary drawbridge:

- To reroute vehicular traffic during the construction of the permanent drawbridge so that it could be built in the same alignment as the existing bridge, thereby avoiding acquisition of the adjacent house and avoiding considerable fill and additional permitting in an environmentally sensitive part of Lagoon Pond. The drawbridge would continue to accommodate boat traffic, especially for emergency refuge for boats in the harbor.
- To get a new bridge built as quickly as possible because they believed there was a considerable risk that, even with repairs, the existing bridge would fail before a permanent new bridge could be built. The temporary prefab bridge can be erected much more quickly because of streamlined permitting and simpler construction – using pre-made parts, a 60-foot high tower, a narrow roadway, and shorter approaches requiring sharper curves in the road (and a 20-mph speed limit) – which would not be acceptable for the permanent bridge.

MassHighway held a public hearing in November 2003 to show the community the preliminary drawings (called the 25% design plan) for the temporary

drawbridge. At that time, there was much discussion of various options, including relocating the bridge to another location, and even building a tunnel. To focus the community's reaction and coordinate relations with MassHighway, the towns of Oak Bluffs and Tisbury created the Drawbridge Committee that included town representatives, the County Engineer, and a representative from the MVC.

The Committee noted that the two-bridge solution would have many disadvantages: the additional disruption of having two construction projects, the additional expense, and the risk that this unattractive and less safe bridge would stay in place much longer than presently intended. However, the temporary drawbridge plan avoided having to acquire the house and avoided the additional fill and permitting required for a bridge in a new location. Most importantly, the Committee felt that the safety, economic, and inconvenience consequences of having Beach Road closed during the summer if the existing bridge failed were so great that it was simply not worth taking the chance. Note that the Coast Guard's position is that the bridge must remain in the up position in case of failure. After much analysis and debate, the Committee "reluctantly" endorsed the two-bridge solution, provided preparations were simultaneously started on the permanent drawbridge. This position was endorsed by both towns' boards of selectmen. A detailed report was given in May 2004 to MassHighway, including recommendations to shift the lift portion of the bridge to straighten the channel for greater boating safety.

In January 2005, the Committee held a public meeting to discuss the 75% design plans and sent additional comments to MassHighway. One remaining issue is the bicycle and pedestrian accommodation. Presently, the plans call for a 5' walkway on the pond side of the bridge. This raises concerns about its narrowness and the need for people to cross the road to get to it. We are awaiting MassHighway's response.

MassHighway is expecting to receive its final permit, from the Coast Guard, within a few weeks, to advertise for construction soon after, to have a contractor in place next spring, to have the piles driven during winter '06-'07 (the only time construction work can take place in the water for environmental reasons), build the superstructure in the spring of 2007, and have the bridge in operation by the fall of 2007. MassHighway considers that building the temporary drawbridge is the only viable approach.

Permanent Drawbridge

MassHighway says that it will take 6-8 years before the permanent bridge is completed. This is largely because of the required procedures to hire consultants, settle on a concept with public participation, prepare the technical drawings and documents, and obtain permits. In response to the community's concerns, MassHighway did begin working on the permanent bridge by starting the lengthy process of hiring consulting engineers. They have completed the first steps of the request for proposals procedure and, earlier this month, received submissions. They will now select three firms to submit more complete technical proposals. Although the Committee is pleased that MassHighway has started working on the permanent bridge, the Committee is concerned that, even at these early stages, progress is lagging, perhaps by six months.

MassHighway's chief engineer has formally committed the agency to building the permanent bridge as soon as it can be designed and permitted. Also, the Committee has carried out extensive efforts to inform our State and federal elected officials of the importance of building the permanent bridge in a timely way.

To help move the process along, the Committee gave preliminary recommendations for the design of the permanent bridge, including calling for a separate bicycle path anticipating an extension of the path between Wind's Up and the town landing. In August 2005, the Committee held a public meeting to get input on the design.

Next Wednesday's public meeting will provide more details about the status of various aspects of the drawbridge project and provide a venue for citizens to ask questions. It will probably be a last opportunity to discuss the one-bridge/two-bridge issue, since the contract for the temporary drawbridge will soon be advertised and awarded. We urge everyone who is interested in this matter to attend.

Melinda Loberg is Chair of the Drawbridge Committee and Mark London is Executive Director of the Martha's Vineyard Commission, which is coordinating the Committee's efforts. All the documents mentioned above, including all Drawbridge Committee meeting minutes, are available at the Martha's Vineyard Commission website: www.mvcommission.org and search for the word "drawbridge".