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Selectmen Struggle To Control Cost Of Bridge

By Jake Johnson
Andover Board of Selectmen

Back in 2005, the Town of Andover applied for state aid in replacing the Morrill Hill Road bridge. State bridge aid requires the Town to pay for the replacement of the bridge, and the state reimburses the Town for 80% of the total cost.

In 2005, the price for replacing the Morrill Hill Road bridge was \$420,000. In 2010, the replacement price for the bridge had risen to \$599,000 for a pre-cast buried rigid frame, or \$761,000 for pre-stressed concrete deck beams.

It's not the price of construction that inflated the price tag from 2005 to 2010. It's the new, more stringent standards to be met in making the bridge large enough to withstand a 100-year flood event.

The state's bridges and dams did not withstand well the flooding throughout New Hampshire on Mothers Day of 2006 and subsequent flooding in 2007 and 2008. There was widespread destruction in other communities, as well as in our own. The Highland Lake dam was damaged in the 2006 flood event and had to be replaced, at a cost to the town of \$552,000 and growing.

In response to the problems caused by flooding in 2006 through 2008, the state beefed up the standard for water flowing through and under structures. With those new standards in place, today's Morrill Hill Road "bridge" – actually an eight-foot high by 11-foot wide culvert – will have to be replaced with a 32-foot long bridge that rises a foot higher above the water than the current culvert.

Avoiding A Budget-Buster

The Board of Selectmen stands firm that we cannot spend more than the \$420,000 that was raised and appropriated at the 2010 Town Meeting to replace the bridge. Last year, the Board worked with engineer Sean James of Hoyle, Tanner and Associates to accomplish two tasks:

- Get a waiver from the state to drop the 100-year flood event requirement to a 50-year flood event requirement on this bridge. This gives us the option of a smaller, 24-foot wide, 12-foot high pre-cast concrete

structure.

- Keep the cost for the replacement bridge at no more than \$420,000! Our road agent, Jon Champagne, worked with Mr. James to look at using the Town's local highway crew, the Town's rental rates and wage scale, and local materials (including some of the stone and gravel that you saw being produced this spring at the Transfer Station) to bring the price of the bridge replacement back down to \$420,000.

Earlier this year, the State granted the waiver of the 100-year flood requirement. Jon and Mr. James were able to get the price down to \$429,000.

DOT Meetings

Everything was looking great until the New Hampshire Department of Transportation (DOT) informed us that, due to the fact that the Town does not own its own construction equipment and that the Road Agent would therefore be using equipment from his own company, we would be violating the requirement for competitive bidding.

We were also informed that to receive state aid for this project, our Road Agent would need to have bridge building experience and be included on the approved bridge contractor list on file at DOT. In addition, he might not be allowed to bid because of "insider" information.

Fortunately, on June 20 the Board met with DOT again. We explained that although we don't own the equipment, our road crew are municipal employees paid on the Town rate scale. Equipment is rented from local contractors at the Town rental rate. Parts of the project will be bid out: paving, guardrail installation, and installing the precast bridge and wing walls.

After much discussion, we got a tentative "thumbs up" to use our own Road Agent for much of the project. We still need to give DOT a detailed budget of the Town portion of the project showing a savings from what the engineer estimates for the project. If all goes well, a Fall 2011 replacement of the bridge could become reality.

A Little History

The history of the Morrill Hill Road bridge dates back to the late 1800s, and the stonework on the north side of the bridge still has that craftsmanship. In 1967, the culvert was replaced by the Town's road agent, John Jurta, and local highway crew. We think that our current road agent and local highway crew can continue that same tradition.

By the way, the current bridge was not damaged in the 100-year flood events in 2006, 2007, and 2008! The reason we need to replace it now is that the culvert is deteriorating. The material around it and under the roadway is weakening, as seen in recent years with sinkholes in the roadway pavement.

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