



Comments by the County of Dare

Submitted June 21, 2010

on the

Environmental Assessment

dated May 7, 2010

Replacement of the Herbert C. Bonner Bridge
over Oregon Inlet in Dare County, North Carolina

INTRODUCTION

Replacement of the Herbert C. Bonner Bridge has been repeatedly delayed for environmental studies. The Environmental Assessment (EA), dated May 7, 2010, represents the latest in a long series of reviews. It identifies and assesses changes that have occurred since the approval of the previous Final Environmental Impact Statement Section 4(f) Evaluation on September 17, 2008.

The purpose of the latest EA, which is now open for public comment, is to determine whether yet another environmental study is needed in the future, or to proceed at this time with a Record of Decision (ROD) clearing the way for bridge replacement. If another environmental review is required, construction would be further delayed while a new "Supplemental" Final Environmental Impact Statement (SFEIS) is completed.

SUMMARY

The County of Dare strongly believes the Bonner Bridge needs immediate replacement as a matter of public safety and necessity. In the interest of replacing the bridge now, Dare County –

- Supports NCDOT's new Preferred Alternative outlined in the EA
- Concurs with the elimination of the Pamlico Sound "Long Bridge" Alternative
- Favors the "Transportation Management Plan" for development of NC Highway 12
- Believes the EA does not have significant impacts requiring further study and delay
- Recommends immediate construction since a Supplemental FEIS is not necessary

Dare County – Supports NCDOT’s New Preferred Alternative

We believe the new Preferred Alternative is a practical solution. The recommended “Parallel Bridge with Transportation Management Plan” alternative would benefit the public by replacing the Bonner Bridge now, while establishing a comprehensive method for handling development along NC Highway 12 to Rodanthe.

The NCDOT new Preferred Alternative achieves two objectives –

1. It immediately solves the most pressing problem now, which is the urgent need to replace the Bonner Bridge. This portion of the overall project focuses on a limited geographical area involving approximately 1.5 miles in length. This is the focal point of the project that demands immediate attention for the following reasons –
 - Bonner Bridge is the lifeline between Hatteras Island and the remainder of Dare County. Bridge inspections have rated the Bonner Bridge at only 2 out of a top score of 100. In fact, the Structural Condition Assessment done December 21, 2006 said, “due to the advanced stages of deterioration, replacement of the Bonner Bridge within the next ten years remains a necessity.” Any further delay in replacing the bridge only increases the risk to the general public.
 - Bonner Bridge is vital for public safety as well as the economic, cultural, historic and social well being of our community.
 - Without the Bonner Bridge, public access to Hatteras Island would be devastated with drastic consequences to residents, small business owners, property owners and millions of yearly visitors.
2. It addresses the development along NC Highway 12 in a way that is appropriate at the time, based on actual conditions. This portion of the Preferred Alternative, known as the Transportation Management Plan, represents the most sensible way to address this dynamic and unpredictable terrain encompassing a vast area of approximately 13 miles from the Bonner Bridge to Rodanthe.

Dare County supports the new Preferred Alternative because it would replace the Bonner Bridge immediately while developing NC Highway 12 in an appropriate way later. The uncertainty of predicting future conditions along NC Highway 12 should not be used, in any way, as justification to delay the immediate need for replacing the Bonner Bridge now.

Dare County – Concurs with the elimination of the “Long Bridge”

It is in the public interest that the Pamlico Sound Bridge Corridor Alternative, known as the “Long Bridge” be eliminated. This Alternative would have required the construction of a colossal 17-mile span running parallel to the Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge.

A bridge of such massive length would rank among the longest structures in the world. In view of the current National and State economy, securing funding in the foreseeable future for a 17-mile bridge is unrealistic.

Public safety would be further jeopardized by waiting until the funds may someday become available to cover the unprecedented costs of an expansive 17-mile bridge. Instead, a practical and affordable solution exists today by building a parallel bridge immediately as described in the NCDOT Preferred Alternative.

In view of the opposition expressed by environmental groups for a seven mile mid-county bridge in nearby Currituck, the anticipated objections and delays for a 17 mile “long bridge” replacement for the Bonner Bridge would have inevitably been lengthy and time consuming, had this option not been eliminated in the new Preferred Alternative.

Dare County supports the assessment in the Environmental Assessment (EA), where the revised Final Section 4(f) Evaluation determined that the Pamlico Sound Bridge Corridor Alternatives, known as the “Long Bridge” were not feasible and prudent avoidance alternatives to the use of a Section 401(F) property.

Dare County – Favors the “Transportation Management Plan”

After the primary goal of replacing the Bonner Bridge is achieved, the development of NC Highway 12 to Rodanthe can better be determined and resolved as outlined in the “Transportation Management Plan” of the NCDOT Preferred Alternative.

The Transportation Management Plan (TMP) does not specify a particular action at this time because of the inherent uncertainty in predicting future conditions. Instead, it addresses NC Highway 12 development through a comprehensive plan, whereby NCDOT would fund and implement a coastal monitoring program that actively monitors conditions in determining the best course of action for each phase of future development.

Dare County – Believes the EA does not need further study or delay

In the past 21 years, there have been numerous environmental impact studies pertaining to the Bonner Bridge. Time and again, various agencies have closely examined all the available options in detail. There has been a Draft Environmental Impact Statement, a Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Statement, and even a Supplement to the Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Statement before the Final Environmental Impact Statement was released September 17, 2008.

The latest Environmental Assessment (EA), dated May 7, 2010 by the Federal Highway Administration and the North Carolina Department of Transportation is another complete and thorough review.

The new Preferred Alternative is a mixing and matching of the other Parallel Bridge Corridor alternatives already assessed in the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) with only minor revisions. It does not result in new impacts not previously identified in the FEIS.

Dare County believes the range of environmental studies that have been done to date, have adequately researched and documented in detail the impacts to human and natural environments. Accordingly, a new Supplemental Final Environmental Impact Statement (SFEIS) is not needed.

Dare County - Recommends immediate construction of a new bridge

The most significant aspect of the new Preferred Alternative in the Environmental Assessment (EA) is the clarion call for immediate replacement of the Bonner Bridge.

The people have already waited far too long. There is no need to suffer through additional delays for more environmental studies. No appreciable new technology has been developed. No new knowledge has been added. There is no legitimate reason to delay the project any further.

As outlined in the Environmental Assessment, the Preferred Alternative represents a practical way to get the Bonner Bridge replaced now. The residents and visitors of Dare County deserve nothing less.

It is time for all the environmental studies to finally end. Dare County calls for the issuance of a Record of Decision (ROD) so construction can begin immediately on replacement of the Bonner Bridge.

Closing Note

The above comments reflect the general views of Dare County in support of the Preferred Alternative outlined in the Environmental Assessment.

Dare County may submit additional comments during the public hearings scheduled July 6, 2010 in Manteo, and July 8, 2010 in Buxton, and afterwards until the August 9, 2010 deadline.