

## **Covered bridge may take two years to finish**

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PEPPERELL -- Long-awaited efforts to rebuild Pepperell's landmark Chester A. Waterous covered bridge are expected to officially get underway this month when MassHighway releases the contract to S&R Construction Co. Inc., of Lowell.

Still on target, as well, is the 18- to 24-month timeframe to construct the bridge.

The news about releasing the contract came during a conversation with DPW Director Robert E. Lee and state Rep. Robert Hargraves in Town Hall concerning a Dec. 6 site visit Lee made with representatives from the contractor, MassHighway, National Grid and the state Division of Fisheries and Wildlife (DFW). The discussion centered around the relocation of electric transmission lines near the bridge.

The land by the bridge belongs to DFW.

A spokesman from Sen. Panagiotakos' office confirmed the pending signing. Both Panagiotakos and Hargraves have maintained pressure in Boston to keep the project moving despite repeated delays, Lee said.

The location for the utilities bridge across the Nashua River, to be used during construction, was also settled during the site visit.

Construction details, or at least a schedule for the siting of construction equipment on both sides of the Nashua River, are expected to be announced following a pre-construction conference next month at the MassHighway district office in Worcester, Lee said.

The project will be funded 80 percent with federal highway money and 20 percent from MassHighway.

S&R, as low bidder, was awarded the \$7.97 million contract last month. There were three bids between \$7.9 million and \$8 million, three more between \$8 million and \$9 million and one bid that topped \$10 million.

Lee recently said the narrow gap between the four lowest bidders shows the contract was awarded at what is now the going rate.

In February 2001, the bridge replacement cost was estimated at \$2.1 million. That year, MassHighway cited the bridge as being structurally deficient, resulting in the DPW lowering the weight limit from 22 tons to only 6 tons. This has essentially eliminated most commercial truck traffic from using the bridge.

By the spring of 2005 -- when money was appropriated for the project -- the estimated cost had risen better to plan for 24 months.

Although the schedule has not been announced, the project's steps include siting construction equipment, construction of the utilities bridge, demolition of the existing bridge and -- expected in 2009 -- construction of the new, all-wood bridge.

Lee said the bridge will arrive in town as pre-built "panels" that will be assembled in either Tennessee or New York and transported here.

At the 2005 public input session, Larry Sciabba of MassHighway described the design as having two 12-foot-1-inch travel lanes and two 5-foot-4-inch sidewalks within the footprint of the existing bridge.

Although the existing abutments and horizontal alignment will be maintained for the new structure, the piers will be replaced by new ones and the vertical height of the structure will be increased to federal highway standards.

The length of the covered bridge portion of the span will actually decrease, from 105 feet to 94 feet.

According to Malek Al-Khatib, a consultant with the state's design contractor, HDR, steel beams will be used for the approach structure and wood timbers for the main structure. The road surface of the new bridge will be either timber or bituminous concrete.

Exterior walls of the bridge house will be solid wood. Steel railings along the interior will protect the walls from any damage from vehicles that might jump the curb. Although historical drawings of the bridge described a lattice structure for the exterior walls, solid walls are preferred to protect the interior of the bridge from the elements.