

By Jack Minch

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PEPPERELL -- London has the Tower Bridge and San Francisco has the Golden Gate Bridge. But in Pepperell, it's the Chester H. Waterous covered bridge that helps shape the town's identity.

The covered bridge is the symbol used for the town flag and it's featured on Police Department shoulder patches.

The effort to construct a new \$7.97 million all-timber covered bridge at the site has had as many twists, turns and bumps as some of this town's scenic back roads. But fear not -- the new bridge should be completed by January 2010, said Frank Tramontozzi, MassHighway's chief engineer for the project.

"It's going to look and feel to the community like what they have there now except it will be new," he said.

That's a relief to people like George Parker Jr., of Nashua, who was in town recently visiting his father.

"Sweet. That's everybody's thing because we've always had a covered bridge. It's part of the town," the Pepperell native said. "I was afraid they were going to tear it down and put some modern thing in."

The Waterous bridge is being replaced because it's not safe. On a scale of 1 to 100 used by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, the bridge earned a 2 last summer.

In fact, the state has ordered that the bridge be closed as of Monday. Pedestrians will be allowed to cross until a new pedestrian bridge is built, but motorists will be detoured up routes 113 and 111.

The underside of the bridge uses steel beams running the length of the span. The rust is flaking off, and in some places the rust holes are big enough to fit a hand through. The bridge vibrates so much when autos pass over that the cold patch the DPW uses to fill potholes shakes out, requiring frequent repairs.

Bob Lee, town engineer and Public Works Department director, has been working to get the bridge replaced since June 1998. He has documents dating to April 1996 showing that the bridge's condition was deteriorating.

Lee and others in town have been adamant about replacing the Waterous bridge with another covered bridge.

"We just don't want to give up that symbol of the town," said Susan Smith, president of the Pepperell Historical Society who works in the Board of Assessors' office.

Lee facetiously calls the Waterous Bridge a "doghouse" because the walls and roof are only decorative. If they were removed the roadway would remain.

The new bridge will be a true timber covered bridge in which the roof is structurally significant to the bridge.

Instead of steel beams, which rusted because of their close proximity to the water, the new bridge will use laminated wood beams using the latest technology, Tramontozzi said.

"They glue and attach these hardwood pieces together and engineer it so it can carry the load without any damage to the bridge," he said. "When they do that they can treat the wood so you don't have bug infiltration and things like that."

The span will be 92 feet long with 49 and a half-foot, steel-re-enforced concrete approaches on each side, Lee said.

Last November, the state awarded S&R Corp. of Lowell the contract to build the bridge.

State and town officials held a preconstruction conference with S&R in January.

Preliminary work that included clearing trees along the river bank and setting up temporary offices near the site has been completed, but construction won't start until National Grid moves a 70,000-volt electrical line that's over the current bridge, Tramontozzi said.

"That really is the most important thing to be done before we start," he said.

A footbridge that's about 4 feet wide will be built to carry utilities such as sewer, natural gas and water lines across the river before demolition on the Waterous bridge begins, Tramontozzi said.

Dave Pease, an amateur photographer, covered-bridge aficionado, is following the bridge developments on his Web site, www.pepperellinfo.net/coveredbridge. He uses lunch breaks from his job as a software engineer to photograph the bridge and post the pictures online.

As you'd expect, he is among those who are glad the state is building a covered bridge to help preserve the town's identity.

"The covered bridge is one of the few things we have from the past we can lay claim to and still use," he said.

A bridge has spanned the Nashua River at Groton Street since about 1740, according to town historians.

It was the site of a showdown in April 1775 between patriot Prudence Wright and her Loyalist brother Sam Cummings and Benjamin Whiting. The men were on their way to warn the British of munitions hidden in Groton. The men of town had marched to Lexington, so Wright and other women scared off Cummings then searched Whiting until they found a note in his boot with information about the munitions.

The first covered bridge was opened in 1848 and lasted until July 1958 when it was closed to auto traffic.

The state built the Waterous bridge, which opened in 1963. Now residents are looking forward to the new one.

"I love the bridge," said Jeri Bozicas who owns The Spa restaurant with her husband, Paul. "I was a little afraid at one point we were going to have a fake covered bridge."