



## City of New Bedford Department of City Planning

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MAYOR  
JON MITCHELL

February 23, 2024

Joseph Breen

Project Manager, Massachusetts Department of Transportation  
10 Park Plaza, Sixth Floor  
Boston, MA 02116

Subject: City of New Bedford  
New Bedford-Fairhaven Bridge Replacement  
MassDOT Project No. 612557  
Preliminary Comments and Requests

Dear Mr. Breen:

On behalf of the City of New Bedford and the New Bedford Port Authority, we wish to express our appreciation that MassDOT has begun the process of replacing the 120-year-old New Bedford-Fairhaven Bridge. The bridge is a critical piece of infrastructure to Greater New Bedford. Although situated entirely in the city, it is the primary corridor into Downtown New Bedford from Fairhaven and towns to the east, and serves as the gateway for marine traffic to the Port of New Bedford's Northern Harbor. Although there is a long-standing and broad consensus that the current bridge is antiquated, its central location and unique design make it a defining landmark in the region, as featured in the recently released motion picture, *FinestKind*.

We appreciate the first public meeting you held in New Bedford last month to brief attendees on MassDOT's preferred design for the bridge replacement – a vertical lift bridge. We look forward to working closely with MassDOT to fully understand the tradeoffs among the alternatives. We wish to share the following feedback before the project advances further:

**1. A Full Understanding of Trade-offs Among Alternatives. We request that MassDOT share the details of the decision matrix MassDOT referenced in the public presentation so that residents of Greater New Bedford can be informed of the overall merits and benefits of the identified alternatives.**

We believe that a full understanding of the tradeoffs is necessary to achieve the broadest possible support for the alternative that is ultimately selected. Toward this end, it is important to know, for example, whether the evaluative criteria considered factors beyond transportation and construction alone. There are real concerns in terms of future port operations and activity by imposing a height restriction in an active harbor where no such restriction currently exists.

More insight into MassDOT's decision making process also would help clarify conflicting information between previous studies and the recent presentations. The 2015 alternatives analysis contains a detailed matrix and identifies a Tall Vertical Lift Bridge and Double-leaf Dutch Bascule Bridge as preferred alternatives, yet the most recent presentation put forward the Tall Vertical Lift Bridge as the only preferred alternative. The 2015 study notes that areas north of the bridge have potential for redevelopment or expansion to meet the needs of the offshore wind industry. Yet, the recent *Navigation Impact Report – Fairhaven – New Bedford Bridge over Acushnet River* dated September 2023 (Navigational Report) states the "previously cited need for extraordinary vertical clearance for offshore wind equipment is no longer a concern." This statement appears to be based on proposed offshore wind uses in the Upper Inner Harbor, which have developed under the current horizontal clearance restrictions imposed by the existing bridge and not future development opportunities that could be afforded if there were neither a height nor horizontal restriction.

**2. A height restriction should not be allowed without fully vetting the decision matrix with the City and towns impacted by the decision.**

Replacing the swing span with a modern bridge design will open the Northern Harbor to new economic development opportunities. Given the widely accepted future demand for offshore wind port facilities – and the limited number of deep-water ports in the Northeast – it is expected that the Port of New Bedford will continue to be a focal point in the offshore wind industry for the foreseeable future. Setting a height restriction might limit the competitive advantage of the New Bedford harbor in the offshore wind industry, which has clearance needs of well over 250' above the water.

**3. The fastest possible open and close sequence should be a higher priority in evaluating alternatives.** We appreciate MassDOT's continued publicly stated commitment to limit any closures impacting vessel navigation as much as possible during construction and consideration for mitigation of traffic congestion issues along the corridor. That said, it is not clear from MassDOT's latest presentation how each of the alternatives rank in terms of opening and closing speeds.

**4. The list of "Project Goals" in MassDOT's presentation did not include aesthetic considerations. The location of the bridge will make it highly visible. Like the current bridge, the new bridge must be an architectural asset that enhances its surroundings and proclaims the importance of the port.** We believe the bridge should be designed with such care and thoughtfulness that it brings pride to its residents. As such, there is a collective expectation from the community that any type of public landmark is representative of New Bedford's prominent maritime port.

We are concerned that all of the examples of vertical lift bridges offered by MassDOT are decidedly functional and lacking any discernable sense of aesthetic consideration. The visual impacts on New Bedford and Fairhaven's nearby historic resources need to be considered in the decision making.

On recent collaborations, MassDOT and New Bedford have produced functional, modern designs that do not ignore the aesthetic importance of landmark infrastructure projects while still respecting project schedule, form, function, and cost. Inclusive architectural elements using a creative, collaborative design approach does not mean that project schedules are longer, or project costs need to be increased significantly, if at all. It is critical however that the discussion of these elements start as early as possible in the design process. Now is the opportune time.

**4. The bridge design must be resilient to sea level rise and storm surge.**

The replacement bridge must incorporate climate resiliency in its design. Despite the hurricane barrier, New Bedford Harbor remains vulnerable to the increased extreme weather events and sea level rise predicted to accompany climate change. These global climate impacts should not render a new bridge obsolete before its anticipated end of service. Therefore, the design should consider the impact of sea level rise not only in day-to-day operations but also in the bridge's ability to serve as vital link during severe weather events.

The recent Navigational Report notes "an additional 3 ft of vertical clearance has been added to account for the predicted sea level rise of the New Bedford Harbor area during the life span of the proposed bridge" but does not cite the source of these estimates or their timeframe. To this end, we would like to collaborate with the design team to understand the approach used to address climate change ensuring a shared understanding of the proposed life span of the NB-FH Bridge and the projected climatological impacts during this period. Further, as seen during recent coastal storms, the impacts of climate change in the region extend beyond sea level rise, and all new infrastructure should be designed with maximum resiliency in mind.

**5. Roadway improvements must extend beyond the replaced bridge span.**

Multimodal improvements must be incorporated into the design of the entire bridge and roadway approaches so that a safe transportation resource for all motorists, cyclists, and pedestrians can be achieved.

**6. Coordination must occur between the bridge project and the Interstate 195-Route 18 Interchange replacement construction project schedules.**

As we have said previously in public meetings, it is essential that construction schedules between this project and the I-195-Rt18 Interchange replacement project (Project No. 606527) be coordinated and aligned. We recognize these are critically important transportation infrastructure improvements that will benefit the region greatly over the long term. We urge very thoughtful analysis of the constraints the construction phases and durations will have on the businesses and the employees of the working port. Issues such as detour routes and scheduled road closures or lane restrictions schedules need to be coordinated.

**7. A working group must be established to regularly review and comment on the bridge design.**

The best results can be achieved by establishing a working group that includes the MassDOT NB-FH Bridge Team, City, Port, and Town Staff to conduct a final evaluation of alternatives and begin to work toward 25% percent design. Our teams have successfully collaborated on the design of the I-195 Viaduct Replacement and the Route 18/Southcoast Rail Pedestrian Bridge projects. We envisage that this working group would meet regularly to discuss project design, key project elements, and review all subsequent phases to ensure the project incorporates thoughtful and intentional design while producing a functional bridge. This collaborative approach is the best way to achieve the project's goals.

We are committed to working with MassDOT on this project to ensure that, once completed, the new bridge will provide a modern gateway, improve surface transportation, and honor the landmark status of our existing bridge with a structure that is equally remarkable.

We look forward to partnering with you throughout this process.

Sincerely,



Jennifer Carloni  
Director of City Planning  
City of New Bedford



Gordon Carr  
Executive Director  
Port of New Bedford

Cc:

New Bedford City Council  
Senator Mark Montigny  
Representative Antonio Cabral  
Representative Christopher Hendricks  
Representative William Straus  
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