

Summer-long I-295 closure being discussed Wednesday

Darcie_Moore@TimesRecord.Com

03/17/2008

RICHMOND — A regional informational meeting about construction planned for Interstate 295 this summer will be held Wednesday at 6 p.m. at Richmond High School in the cafeteria.

The Maine Department of Transportation announced recently that the interstate's southbound lanes are expected to be closed for much of the summer from Exit 39 in West Gardiner to Exit 31 in Topsham. Route 201 would be the detour route in addition to the Maine Turnpike.

Seth Goodall, vice chairman of the Richmond Board of Selectmen, said he invited the MDOT to the meeting to provide information and address questions about the rehabilitation of the highway's southbound lanes, the construction plans and traffic management, safety issues, and the construction schedule.

"Maine DOT has communicated with municipal officials and larger businesses along the corridor. However, it is essential that the region's residents hear the proposal and have the opportunity to ask questions," said Goodall. "It has been a long time since Route 201 has seen the amount of traffic that it will this summer, (and) safety is my biggest concern."

Goodall wrote that closing the southbound lane of I-295 will decrease the amount of time it takes to rebuild the 20-mile stretch of highway, from three years of construction to three months, as well as reducing the project cost and improving safety for construction workers.

The municipalities along the proposed Route 201 detour include Gardiner, Richmond, Bowdoin, Bowdoinham and Topsham. Litchfield and Dresden also have been invited to the meeting, Goodall said.

"Unfortunately, impacts cannot be isolated solely to Route 201," said Goodall. "Secondary roads, such as Route 24 along the Kennebec (River), will also see increased use. It is important that those most closely impacted have all the details."

Meg Lane, spokeswoman for the MDOT, said the concrete on this I-295 section of road was installed in the early 1970s. This section of interstate handles up to 22,000 cars per day from July to August.

Joyce Taylor, assistant bureau director for project development for MDOT, said the concrete is "sick" and falling apart in the area slated for repair. The MDOT has tried different methods to treat it, she said, and some have worked better than others. But the department is concerned about cars hitting chunks of concrete with tires and sending it flying toward the cars behind.

"We need to stabilize that concrete," she said. "We think the most cost effective (method) is to rubblize it" — a new process for the MDOT. The contractor would grind the concrete into small pellets and pave over it, she said. The work would occur between June 15 and Aug. 31. The entire job will be longer for things like drainage and guardrail work but much of that can be done at night.

Concrete has a very long life, Taylor said, but this stretch of concrete road would be paved because even with the growing cost of asphalt, the initial cost of using cement is more than MDOT can afford. The construction could cost as much as \$32 million but the repairs should have a 20-year life.

Taylor said the department has studied the detour route carefully and determined that Route 201 has adequate capacity.

"We are going to look into whether we can get some police enforcement out on Route 201, especially at night to try to encourage the trucks not to speed," she said. "We will try to encourage trucks onto the turnpike."

Taylor said the MDOT anticipates about 50 percent of vehicles to divert to the turnpike and 50 percent to Route 201.

The department has also been working with the Maine Turnpike Authority to coordinate construction work and road closures as best as possible.

Acknowledging the common criticism about doing major road

construction during the height of tourist season, Taylor explained that certain temperatures are required to hold the pavement together so it lasts longer. The biggest failure of roads occurs when pavement is put down in wet and cold conditions, she said.

Lane elaborated on that issue and said the decision was made to wait until school is out to do the re-routing on Route 201 to avoid having children cross the roads or school buses backing up traffic with frequent stops.

"We will do everything to encourage people to use the turnpike," Lane said, adding that it is the sensible choice for people heading to points south of Portland. The MDOT will have a major communications campaign to get the word out to the public so they can plan ahead, particularly to try to avoid peak travel time and so commuters can try to arrange car pooling.

Taylor some planning will include developing an incident or emergency plan should, for example, the worst case scenarios happen and the turnpike have to be closed down for a few hours in conjunction with the I-295 closure.

The work will be advertised starting April 2 and bids will be opened three weeks from that date, Taylor said.

Goodall emphasized all of the neighboring towns are invited to the meeting because the construction affects more than just Richmond.