



June 30, 2009

Secretary Ian Bowles
Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs
100 Cambridge Street, Suite 900
Boston, MA 02114

Attn: MEPA Office, EOE #14427
Purvi Patel, MEPA Analyst

Re: MEPA Environmental Notification Form Comments
Whittier Bridge/I-95 Improvement Project

Dear Secretary Bowles:

On behalf of Coastal Trails Coalition, Inc., I thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on the Environmental Notification Form prepared for the Whittier Bridge/I-95 Improvement Project and filed with the MEPA Office on June 1, 2009.

The Coastal Trails Coalition, Inc. is a non-profit corporation whose mission is to assist in the development of the Coastal Trails Network, a 30-mile system of interconnected on- and off-road trails linking the four communities of Amesbury, Newbury, Newburyport and Salisbury. The Coastal Trails Coalition was formed in 2004 with the support of the Essex National Heritage Commission, the National Park Service Rivers and Trails Program, and the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission. In addition to its paid membership, the organization maintains a mailing list of approximately 400 municipal officials, businesses, and individuals.

The comments below are provided pursuant to the Coastal Trails Coalition's review of the project Environmental Notification Form and its participation in the MEPA ENF site walk and public meeting held on June 18 in Newburyport. We believe the comments offered below are consistent with the policies, mandates, and protocols set forth in:

- Massachusetts General Law 90E, Section 2A, as amended
- Massachusetts Coastal Zone Management Public Access Management Principle #1
- MEPA Greenhouse Gas Emissions Policy, as revised
- Massachusetts Sustainable Development Principles
- *Massachusetts Highway Department Project Development and Design Guidebook*

We firmly believe the project represents a rare and unique opportunity to significantly advance development of the region's alternative transportation network. While the ENF does include several references to the importance of the existing regional trail network as well as to the state, regional, and local goals of enhancing this network, our review of current design alternatives revealed insufficient integration of bicycle and pedestrian facilities into the project. Therefore, we ask that the MEPA Office work with the Massachusetts Highway Department to incorporate into the planning, design, and construction of the project more facilities to promote and safely accommodate bicycle and pedestrian traffic as outlined below.

Whittier Bridge

The provision of bicycle and pedestrian accommodations across the Merrimack River as part of the new Whittier Bridge will significantly enhance access to and from neighborhoods in Newburyport, Amesbury, and Salisbury. Currently, in order to access the region's emerging trail network, bicyclists and pedestrians must cross the nearby Chain and Hines Memorial Bridges. These existing facilities do not offer particularly safe or inviting bicycle and pedestrian access.

Highly desirable is a linear bicycle and pedestrian facility crossing the Merrimack River and providing direct connections in Newburyport to the Park and Ride lot, the Ferry Road and Pine Hill Road neighborhoods and Moseley Woods (via Newburyport Water Department land), in Amesbury to the Evans Place and Main Street neighborhoods, and to the east-west rail trail situated just north of Exit 58 near the Amesbury and Salisbury municipal boundary.

There are numerous examples of major highway bridge facilities, including Interstates, successfully incorporating bicycle and pedestrian access. Included are those in nearby Hartford (Bulkley/I-84 Bridge over the Connecticut River) and those in New York City (George Washington/I-95 Bridge over the Hudson River, Robert F. Kennedy/Triborough/I-278 Bridge, Queensborough/59th Street Bridge, Williamsburg Bridge, and Brooklyn Bridge).

I-95 Railroad Bridges and Corridor

The preservation of the former railroad bridges carrying I-95 just north of Exit 58 and the enhancement of existing railroad corridor on either side is critical to enabling area residents and visitors to walk or bicycle between Salisbury and Amesbury on a dedicated shared-use path. The key steps to linking the existing rail-trail sections in both towns are the investigation and extension of the Salisbury Point Ghost Trail from its current terminus near the Salisbury-Amesbury line under I-95 to a new logical terminus at the intersection of Rt. 110 and Elm Street in Amesbury. This connection is a central element of the emerging Coastal Trails Network supported by both communities.

Merrimack River Trail/Greenway

The project can significantly enhance progress on the long-planned Merrimack River Trail by designing and installing a shore line trail (across the project right-of-way and Newburyport Water Department lands) linking Moseley Woods and Maudslay State Park. The Merrimack River Trail/Greenway is identified as a regional priority in *Commonwealth Connections*, the Department of Conservation and Recreation's vision and blueprint for development of a statewide trail and greenway network.

In closing, we strongly encourage MEPA and MassHighway to utilize this massive and worthwhile project as an opportunity to fulfill the promise of a truly diverse and inclusive transportation system.

We look forward to further dialogue with the MassHighway project team regarding these comments.

Sincerely,



Bill Steelman
President

cc: Senator Steven A. Baddour
Representative Michael A. Costello
Mayor John Moak, City of Newburyport
Mayor Thatcher Kezer, Town of Amesbury
Neil Harrington, Town of Salisbury
Dennis DiZoglio, Merrimack Valley Planning Commission
Luisa Paiewonsky, Massachusetts Highway Department
Patricia Leavenworth, Massachusetts Highway Department
Paul Jahnige, Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation