

Portsmouth Herald article /opinion

Now is time to make our voices heard on bridges

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For months now, the states of New Hampshire and Maine have been taking a detailed look at the future viability of both the Memorial and Sarah Mildred Long bridges. The states hired the engineering firm HNTB, Inc. to conduct a \$2 million study, which has involved a number of small- and large-group public meetings in both Portsmouth and Kittery, Maine. Their time frame is an ambitious one. The states want to wrap up the study by next June, by promulgating a handful of concrete recommendations indicating how the two states should proceed.

Time is of the essence, as we all well know. The Memorial Bridge recently re-opened after being closed for emergency repairs. New Hampshire Department of Transportation engineers determined earlier in the fall that a gusset plate had deteriorated so badly that the bridge could bear no weight. Although it's open again, the bridge's days are ultimately numbered if nothing is done to rehabilitate it. The Sarah Long Bridge has a slightly longer life span, but it too has weight-limit restrictions.

While the states wait to hear if they will receive federal stimulus funds that would be used to rehabilitate the Memorial Bridge, the odds are not in their favor. It was anticipated that as much as \$100 billion in application requests would vie for the \$1.5 billion in funds.

Thus the work of the Maine/New Hampshire Connections Study is critical in plotting the future of these two pivotal bridges, the communities of Kittery and Portsmouth and the greater Seacoast area that uses them.

On Dec. 16, a public meeting will be held to discuss the work of the study participants to date, explain why they have eliminated certain options and why they are keeping others. While a second high-level to

replace the two bridges is no longer under consideration, nor is a ferry service and a tunnel, many options remain.

Those residents of Portsmouth and Kittery who have been paying attention to this process with half an ear should right now give their full focus to this. Anyone who lives or works on either side of the Route 1 Bypass, by North Mill Pond in Portsmouth or on the banks of the Piscataqua close to the Long Bridge should focus on this. Anyone who lives on Bridge Street in Kittery should focus on this. Anyone who uses the Memorial Bridge on a regular basis to go back and forth across the river should focus on this. Any or all could be directly affected as the study group winnows down the options.

The greater Seacoast community's voice needs to be heard. This is a pivotal point in the discussions. We encourage you to visit www.mainenhconnections.org to learn more and attend the public meeting at 6 p.m. on Wednesday, Dec. 16, at Portsmouth High School.