



The Outer Banks Chamber of Commerce

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Drew Joyner
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Dear Mr. Joyner:

The Outer Banks Chamber of Commerce, serving more than 1,000 members in Dare, Currituck and Hyde counties, writes to voice support for the current proposed alternative as the correct means to replace the Herbert C. Bonner Bridge, which spans Oregon Inlet in Dare County.

The residents and visitors to the Outer Banks deserve safe transportation routes that allow reasonable travel without destroying the economy or endangering lives. The Herbert C. Bonner Bridge project is the most-studied highway project in the state's history. While we currently seem to be engaged in a never-ending return to the proverbial drawing board to identify more alternatives or conduct more studies, each hour that passes puts disaster an hour closer. Our residents and visitors should be afforded a safe, reliable trip across the inlet. Our children should be able to travel to or from Hatteras Island so that they can go on field trips or to a routine doctor's visit without fear of becoming a victim of a catastrophic bridge failure. Our residents don't need to cross the bridge daily with trepidation.

While environmental protection is important, it also is imperative to remember that our human population is an equal part of this ecosystem, and the potential impacts to our lives and safety deserve no less than equal consideration to the current level of protection afforded our precious flora and fauna. The parallel bridge is the most efficient and most economically sensible replacement option. Further delay is tempting fate.

This 20-year-old saga has had many chapters -- surely none of us want to author a final chapter or participate in a study commission about a catastrophic and deadly bridge collapse that occurred while planners continued to "study" the problem.

Impacts on health and safety of Hatteras Island residents and visitors from the potential failure of the bridge are neither entirely unknown nor unanticipated.

One of Dare County Sheriff Rodney Midgett's concerns related to the continued deterioration of the bridge is the possibility of imposing load limits or even one-way traffic on the current bridge because of its condition. In that event, his assessment is that the Sheriff's Office would not be able to provide adequate staffing to police the necessary restrictions on a 24-hour basis. Emergency ferry service in the aftermath of a bridge failure would not be capable of handling the large amount of essential EMS, fire service and law enforcement traffic that would be needed. Hurricane and other evacuations would be severely hampered, which would pose another significant threat to public safety.

Since emergency ferry service would have to cease during severe weather conditions, public safety would be further compromised. During such times, residents and visitors would be helpless without any type of emergency transportation.

Sheriff Midgett has stated that any disruption of electrical service on Hatteras Island — which is fed to the island via a cable under the bridge — also would have a direct impact on crime and public safety and have life-threatening consequences for those with serious medical issues or who are dependent upon life support equipment.

In addition to safety concerns, to choose any other alternative will have devastating economic consequences for the county, the region and the state. Because of the complex issues involved, there is no reasonable method which will allow an estimated dollar amount to be assigned to the combined total of the related direct and indirect impacts if the other alternatives are chosen.

Following are examples of the anticipated impacts:

Removal of the bridge without replacing it at the same site will no doubt also mean the removal of the groin which currently keeps the inlet from migrating south, as it has historically. If the groin is removed and the location of the inlet shifts, associated dredging costs may well be found to be prohibitive, and efforts of maintaining a moving channel fruitless, thus eliminating the use of the inlet by recreational boats, charter boat fleet and the commercial fishing industry. If these boats are forced to go south to Hatteras Inlet, the extra time and expense will cause great hardship and a loss of fishing effort, and many small businesses will most probably be forced out of business due to rising cost.

According to a North Carolina Fishery Resource Grant project survey conducted in the 2007-08 year, during that time there were approximately 431,000 recreational fishermen — many from out of state — who return year after year to the coast to fish with a favorite for-hire captain. Dare County is the location for most of that activity.

The study project, Economic Impacts and Recreation Value of the North Carolina For-Hire Fishing Fleet, results led researchers to the conclusion that for-hire fishing passengers spend about \$380 million per year, including both on- and off-vessel spending, including fishing fees, lodging, restaurants, shopping, gas and other tourist-related activities. Recreational fishing supports about \$667.4 million in sales along the coast, about 10,000 jobs (including 1,445 for-hire fishing jobs), \$261.4 million in wages and salaries, and \$49.3 million in local/state sales and excise (such as fuel and cigarette) taxes.

According to the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries, during the same time frame as the project survey, Dare County ranked No.1 in the number of Coastal Recreational Fishing Licenses sold with a total of 93,225 in calendar year 2007 and 82,635 in 2008.

The Fishery Resource Grant project report notes that after expenses, the for-hire captains, vessel owners and crew receive about \$26 million in income per year from for-hire fishing activities. From this income they pay annually about \$5.1 million in federal income tax, \$1.8 million in state income tax, \$3.9 million in federal/state PICA tax, \$286,000 in local property tax on residences, and \$576,000 in local property tax on their vessels.

Charter vessel owners spend an estimated \$43.5 million per year on nonlabor items such as fuel, ice, bait, engine and boat repairs, dockage fees, etc. Head-boat owners spend an additional \$5.3 million per year. Including multiplier effects, these expenditures support an estimated \$85 million in sales in coastal North Carolina communities, \$30 million in wages and salaries, more than 1,000 jobs, and more than \$6 million in local/state and excise taxes.

Commercial fishing landings and value statistics reported by the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries show that of 71 million pounds of seafood valued at \$86.8 million landed in the state in 2008, 22.7 million pounds -- valued at \$23 million -- was brought to the docks in Dare County. And of the latter amount, 15.7 million pounds was landed in Wanchese, which is dependent on Oregon Inlet for access to the fishing grounds. In addition to the loss of income of fishermen and seafood dealers, losing these landings also would cost jobs in packing, shipping and in the availability of fresh-caught seafood in local restaurants. And the negative ripple effect would include such business as boat builders, truck sales, refrigeration dealers, packing suppliers and other support industries.

Utilities to support Hatteras Island are currently attached to the bottom of the bridge. Removal of these lines would require the generation of electricity on the island itself since there is no other reasonable alternative to supplying the island's need. Although there is an electric generation plant on the island, it could only meet the needs of the island during the shoulder months, when it is neither too hot nor too cold, and when it is primarily inhabited by residents and not the throngs of visitors who go there each summer. Cost to upgrade to a level that the island could produce all the power that is needed on a year-round basis would be extraordinarily high because it would either call for additional generators and fuel to power them or laying a submarine electrical cable across the floor of the sound.

Access to Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge would be diminished, if not completely lost, without the parallel bridge. The Eastern North Carolina National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Use Study of December 2006, principal author Hans Vogelsson, ECU Department of Recreational and Leisure Studies, based on data collected from October 2004 to October 2005, reported that the area's refuges had a direct economic impact of \$166.6 million and an indirect impact of \$324.6 million. The majority of this impact was credited to the approximate 1 million visitors a year that go to Pea Island.

The alternative 17-mile sound bridge totally lacks the basis of environmental advantage since its construction would tear up at least a 17-mile swath of sound bottom which would reasonably be predicted to result in turbidity and destruction of aquatic vegetation, and put at risk federally listed species, including loggerhead turtles. At this time, there is such concern about the turtles

that severe restrictions have been placed on fishing activities in that area to ensure elimination and/or reduce the number of interactions that could be harmful. There is no way that construction could avoid putting these species at risk. Runoff from such a bridge would add to pollution. Safety issues include but are not limited to adequate access for emergency vehicles traveling to and from the island.

Ferry service is neither an economically viable alternative nor is it in the best interest of health and safety of island residents and visitors.

North Carolina state law mandates that no area can be charged a toll for transportation unless a free route is available as an alternative. Ocracoke Island's only free transportation access is by ferry to Hatteras Island and traveling by NC 12. If ferry service was used as an alternative, the cost could not be recouped through tolls, because it also would become the only free access for Hatteras Island. At a time when inland legislators are suggesting that the ferry system is a financial burden, being told that the state would have to invest hundreds of millions of dollars for additional high speed ferries would most likely meet resistance.

Currently, the ferries traveling between Ocracoke Island and the mainland only operate on schedule approximately 85 percent of the time. It is reasonable to assume that this would be reflected in any ferry service of about equal length of time such as that from Dare County mainland to Hatteras Island. This is not acceptable, particularly when trying to evacuate up to 40,000 people off the island because of the expected arrival of a hurricane.

In events where evacuations from Ocracoke Island are called for, emergency officials there estimate that they need a 72-hour lead time to remove visitors, residents and personnel. This three-day lead is based on the fact that many leave the island by crossing to Hatteras Island and driving NC 12 to connect with one of the two highways heading west off the Outer Banks. If ferry transportation also was imposed on Hatteras Island to the mainland, it would add to the crush of cars trying to leave from that island and hamper efforts on Ocracoke and increase the lead time for both islands' populations.

Without the Bonner Bridge, the Dare County Sheriff stated that his office and other public service agencies would face serious challenges maintaining adequate staff readiness on a continuing basis. Many public safety employees rely upon the Bonner Bridge to report for duty because they do not live on Hatteras Island. Without the bridge, personnel levels could become compromised and further threaten public safety.

Dare County EMS Director WR "Skeeter" Sawyer is adamant that from an emergency medical stance, trying to rely on ferry service to provide emergency care and transport from Hatteras Island is unacceptable. From July 1, 2009 to June 28, 2010, ambulances transported 613 patients off the island by ground. The cost of transporting that number of patients off the island by air is not available, but Dare County does not charge for medical flights, so although there most probably would be an increase in use in that method in the event that the only route was via ferry, the increased cost would not be recouped in fees. According to Sawyer, if there was an accident and both ambulances left the island with patients, the island would be uncovered until another ambulance and crew could replace them, which would take a dangerous amount of time if depending on ferry service.

Dare County Schools Superintendent Sue Burgess states that depending on ferry service for transportation would seriously compromise services provided to Cape Hatteras Elementary School and Cape Hatteras Secondary School, which have a combined enrollment of about 600 students. The time, energy and money it would cost would mean missed opportunities to spend money in other ways that would actually enhance education.

Among the issues that would be problematic for the school system would be the transport and delivery of food commodities used for the schools' nutrition program. Using the ferry would take more time and increase the cost of manpower.

Staff that provide many of the services needed by the county's schools are based at the Central Office in Nags Head. Burgess said that sending bus mechanics or computer technicians to service equipment on Hatteras would bring its own set of problems and increased cost if those trips were made by ferry. And, as with all the agencies, if there was delay in riding the ferry back to the mainland, the school system might have to pay for lodging for stranded personnel.

According to Burgess, athletic programs also would be impacted. The travel time required to play other teams would discourage many schools from scheduling games at Cape Hatteras. And conversely, the time it would take students to go to away games would make such long days that they might not be scheduled due to negative impact on studies.

Depending on ferry service would further hamper the school district's ability to recruit teachers for Hatteras Island schools — an already difficult task. Living on Hatteras Island isn't appealing to everyone because of its isolation, said Burgess. If the island was further isolated by depending on ferry transportation, it would make it even more difficult to fill teaching positions on the island.

The school superintendent's concerns aren't speculative. Burgess was at the helm of the school district when Hurricane Isabel cut an inlet which separated Hatteras village from the remainder of the island. Students from Hatteras village were delivered to school in Buxton by boat for several weeks. Only emergency relief supplies and workers were allowed access to the village via ferry. The village had no electricity or other services until the breach was filled and services were restored about two months later.

Because of that experience, said Burgess, several families moved, which reduced the number of students and related state funding amounts. Although the schools remained opened and services are provided, loss of the students has made the schools more expensive on a per pupil basis. Loss of more students and related funding because of increased isolation would add to the local expense of maintaining these schools.

And there are other problems to consider. Transporting basic necessities such as food and medicine would no doubt add to the cost of these items on the island. Food Lion stores in Dare County have the highest prices in the state compared to the other stores owned by the corporation. This increase in price is because of the added transportation cost of delivering to the area. If delivery trucks have to spend hours on ferries and thus increase labor cost, there is no doubt that the added cost would be passed back to the consumers.

Delivery of enough fuel for both vehicles and for generators to use to provide electricity would bring its own challenges, especially in complying with US Coast Guard regulations, which govern the transporting of combustibles on ferries.

Gone are the days when the weekly mail boat visited Hatteras Island. With today's cutbacks in spending by the US Postal Service, there is no way to determine how mail delivery would be handled if mail trucks were dependent on ferry transportation.

Removing garbage from the island, particularly in the summer time when the population explodes, would be expensive as well as smelly.

Services provided by government agencies such as the health department, social services and those offered by nonprofit charities such as the Community Care Clinic would most likely face many of the same challenges described by the Sheriff, EMS director and school superintendent.

Knowing these facts, there is no reason to "study" the use of ferries — we already know that it is not an acceptable solution to our unacceptable problem.

The replacement of Bonner Bridge isn't just about tourism — it's about people trying to live their lives with dignity, support their families and have a few of the things the rest of the country takes for granted, such as a road to their homes.

Sincerely,



Paul Tine, Chairman
Outer Banks Chamber of Commerce
Board of Directors

Request For Addendum August 9, 2010

The Outer Banks Chamber of Commerce requests that the following addendum be added to our comments on the replacement of the Herbert C. Bonner Bridge that were submitted on Aug. 5. The following information was provided by Jim Kinghorn of Cape Hatteras Electric Cooperative at the Chamber's request.

Statement Concerning Electric Power to Hatteras and Ocracoke Islands and the Bonner Bridge

Introduction

In the event of a temporary or permanent loss of the Bonner Bridge across Oregon Inlet, Cape Hatteras Electric Cooperative will be severely hampered in continuing to achieve its mission of providing reliable and affordable electric power to the citizens and property owners on Hatteras and Ocracoke Islands.

The sole source of electric power to the islands is via a single set of 115,000 volt cables attached to the Bonner Bridge.

Temporary Bridge Failure

Should a failure of the bridge occur that results in damage to the power cables, all power would be immediately lost to the islands, resulting in hardship to customers of the Cooperative. This hardship would result from temporary measures necessary to restore power using on-island generation.

In addition to all other causes of economic hardship, electric power costs would dramatically increase for the duration of the damage until at least a temporary cable rerouting was accomplished. This rerouting would likely require eight weeks or more to complete after clearance was obtained to begin the rerouting.

Even though the Cooperative has available on-island oil-fueled diesel generators belonging to the North Carolina Electric Membership Corporation, the cost of operation of these generators would increase the cost per kilowatt-hour of electric service by an estimated 29 cents to an estimated cost of 41.5 cents per kilowatt-hour.

In addition to operating cost, the existing on-island stationary generators do not have the capacity to meet the electrical demand that would be anticipated after a failure of the bridge that impacted vehicular traffic, much less the peak electrical load under normal traffic access conditions. Meeting the anticipated electrical load after a bridge failure would necessitate bringing at least 10,000 kVA in large portable generators to the island for additional temporary power generation. The increased cost of operating large portable generators would be about 32 cents per KWH. For the portion of the emergency power generated by temporary generators, the cost would be \$44.5 cents per KWH.

The weighted average cost of retail power generated by the stationary and portable generators during an emergency is estimated to be 42.2 cents per KWH, or an average cost above current retail rates of 237 percent for the duration of the outage.

It is estimated that a week or more would be required to get temporary generators operational.

A temporary bridge failure of the type described would have a devastating economic impact on island residents and property owners from electrical cost and supply alone, before the impact for other problems was considered.

Permanent Loss of a Short Route Oregon Inlet Bridge

If the present Bonner Bridge should become permanently unavailable to provide an electrical cable route, the long term cost of electric service to the Islands would increase dramatically.

For the permanent bridge loss scenario, the lowest cost option to permanently provide an electrical supply from the mainland to Hatteras and Ocracoke Islands would be a submarine cable system from the south end of Nags Head to Rodanthe. The minimum cost of this submarine cable project was estimated in 2007 to be in the range of \$33,000,000 to \$35,000,000.

A project of this magnitude would result in a permanent rate increase to Cooperative rate-payers of approximately 26 percent.

If the permanent loss of the present bridge resulted from a sudden or catastrophic failure, construction of a submarine cable system would take a year or more to complete, assuming environmental permitting was completed in a timely manner. During the entire construction period, electrical costs would be as described for the temporary failure discussed above.