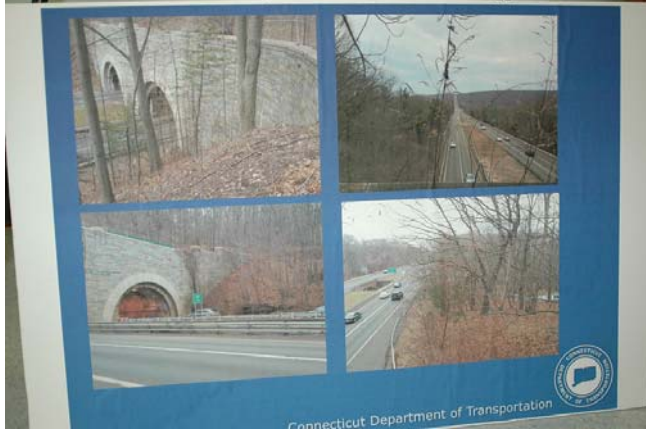




State Seeks Public Input for Tunnel Project



(<https://woodbridgetownnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/map.jpg>)

Map exhibit shows natural resources in the vicinity of the tunnel.



(<https://woodbridgetownnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/inside-photos.jpg>)

Poster showing crumbling concrete in the Heroes Tunnel.

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The state is still in the process of gathering information and weighing different options to come up with a solution for the ageing West Rock tunnel, that is what engineers and project managers told the audience at a "scoping meeting" September 22 in the Woodbridge Senior Center.

The purpose of the project is to address and correct the deficiencies of the 70-year-old tunnel, now known as "Heroes Tunnel", said Project Manager David Cutler. The tunnel takes motorists on the Wilbur Cross Parkway from Exit 59 in Woodbridge and New Haven right under the West Rock Ridge to Hamden's Exit 60. At 1,200 feet in length, it is the only such structure in the state. Due to its unique nature, the Department of Transportation has hired the engineering firm CDM Smith to review the current condition, propose alternatives and eventually come up with a design. Part of this process is a study of the environmental impact any of these solutions may entail.

The public has until October 7 to weigh in and submit their comments. Anyone wishing to discuss the project may contact David Cutler at (860) 594-3210 or by e-mail at David.Cutler@ct.gov. For comments on environmental planning issues, contact Mark W. Alexander, assistant planning director, Environmental Planning; Phone: (860) 594-2931 or email Mark.W.Alexander@ct.gov.

Even if the audience at the meeting did not hear about the alternatives the engineers are considering, including digging a third tunnel, it did learn about the current state of the tunnel and why the state is seeing the need for improvements. "It is not an imminent safety issue," Cutler stated unequivocally. Even so, there is significant deterioration, in particular of the concrete lining, which is being corroded by water penetration and many freeze-and-thaw cycles it is exposed to. The concrete is chipping away, leaving the rebar exposed in some areas.

Joe Balskus, a principal with CDM Smith, said the tunnel, having been built in 1948, does not meet modern safety specifications. The lanes are narrowing as the highway approaches the tunnel, contributing to the frequent bottleneck effect. The shoulders inside the tunnel are six inches wide instead of the eight feet required by modern standards. There is no fire system and the ventilation system is not working.

As far as possible construction scenarios are concerned, closing one barrel for multiple months or detouring traffic through city streets seemed unacceptable, he said. Engineers are hopeful to find a way to rehabilitate the tunnel without major traffic impacts.

Mohammed Jafari, an engineer with CDM Smith, said the tunnel was built in 1948 in the span of a year and a half. Where the rock proved unsafe, they added steel bars, which are covered behind the concrete. Tests have shown those bars to be in good condition, he said. He responded to concerns from Merritt Avenue homeowners about possible blasting, saying that modern technology allows to blast with minimal vibration.

A representative from the City of New Haven asked them to consider enhancing trail access to West Rock Park.

Frank DeLeo, a Woodbridge resident and member of the West River Watershed Coalition, mentioned how during construction of the tunnel back in the 1940s they buried a spring. "Ever since, the water has been seeping into the tunnel," he said. In addition, a drainage pipe along the tunnel is constantly clogged, and the catch basin doesn't get cleaned out, he said. The overflow ends up in the West River and contributes to flooding in Woodbridge and Westville and dumps pollutants into the river.

Next Steps:

- In the next six to nine months, an archaeological survey will be conducted;
- geotechnical borings will be conducted and a geological survey completed;



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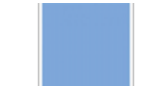



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- environmental studies will be conducted in the next 18 to 24 months;
- a preferred alternative will emerge from the information obtained by these studies; and
- CDM will present a design.

Exit 59 interchange: Several residents, including First Selectman Ellen Scalettar, asked about efforts to coordinate tunnel construction work with the traffic flow improvements at Exit 59. Pete Talarico, an engineer with the Exit 59 Study who was present at the hearing, said all proposed Exit 59 configuration changes end before the tunnel, and will not have a direct impact. "It will have to be coordinated, but they are not interdependent," he said of the two projects.

The state has proposed some intermediate measures to improve the traffic situation along Litchfield Turnpike, work which is slated to start in 2018, Talarico said. The long-term project, which may entail a reconfiguration of the on- and off-ramps at Exit 59, is years out, and could very well coincide with the tunnel project.

By Bettina Thiel – Woodbridge Town News Correspondent

			
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