



Willimantic River Alliance, Inc.

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Comments on Replacement of Bridge No. 02866-RT 275 over the Willimantic River

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Recommendations in Bold Italic type

The Connecticut Department of Transportation proposes to replace the current one lane vehicle bridge over the Willimantic River in Eagleville with a new two lane bridge, with shoulders on each side, which would accommodate pedestrians and cyclists. The new bridge would have open railings, as does the current bridge, so that flood waters could flow across the bridge surface, if necessary.

Recreation and Pedestrian Use: The 25 mile long Willimantic River was designated as a State Greenway by the Connecticut Greenways Council in 2003. The Willimantic River Water Trail was designated as a 21 mile long National Recreation Trail by the Secretary of the Interior in 2012. The river was a source of water power which resulted in the creation of a number of mill villages along its length. The historic village of Eagleville (on the Mansfield side of the river) developed around the former Eagleville Mill complex, and while the mill buildings no longer exist, the village and the dam are still part of the landscape of the Willimantic River valley. The Eagleville Dam impounds the river creating the 80 acre Eagleville Lake. The dam and land on each side of it, along with the lake, form a state owned recreation area which is very popular for fishing and boating. The scenic waterfall is also enjoyed from the parking lots on each side of the river, as well as from the RT 275 Bridge. There is a state boat launch on the Coventry side which accommodates boats that can be carried into the lake, primarily canoes and kayaks; some thru-paddlers take out on the Mansfield side of the dam, portage across RT 275 and put into the river at Eagleville Preserve, just downstream of the bridge. Others take out on the Coventry side at the official boat launch, cross RT 275 and the bridge, and put in at Eagleville Preserve on the Mansfield side of the river.

The annual Willimantic RiverFest river float (this year May 16, 2015) begins in Eagleville where paddlers assemble in the parking lots at the dam and put in just below the existing bridge in Eagleville Preserve. The town owned Eagleville Preserve contains an 11-acre wooded area along the Willimantic River. It is bordered on its northern edge by 9.1 acres of woods belonging to the Ct DEEP. Paddlers, hikers & fishermen park at the dam, cross RT 275 and access the river or hike along the trails of the 20 acre Eagleville Preserve. Walkers, joggers, biker riders & dog walkers also frequent RT 275, cross the bridge and cross back. This is a very busy pedestrian area, considering that it looks like it is in the middle of nowhere!

It is imperative that plans to replace the bridge include detailed plans for safe pedestrian crossing of both the RT 275 roadway and the RT 275 Bridge.

Pedestrian crossing areas should be marked on the roadway and appropriate signs should be erected. The current one lane bridge has stop signs on each side to allow vehicles to cross the bridge one at a time; this slows traffic and accommodates pedestrians. The new two lane bridge, however, will allow continuous vehicular flow without stopping, causing a hazard for pedestrians. New signs indicating heavy pedestrian traffic and right of way are needed.

Signs are also needed which indicate that the bridge crosses the Willimantic River, one on each side of the bridge.

The signposts for the river crossing could also accommodate signs for the Connecticut State Greenway and National Recreation Trail, which could be supplied by the CT DEEP and the Willimantic River Alliance.

A sign should also be attached to the concrete bridge deck for the benefit of water trail users, on the upstream side, telling them this is RT 275 and showing the Coventry and Mansfield town line.

Bridge Aesthetics: At the public informational meeting about this project in February 2015, I made comments about the need for the bridge structure to be aesthetically pleasing at this scenic, recreational, historic and culturally important river crossing. The need for bridge railings which allow water to flow over the bridge in flood conditions is also important in this location, as the floods of October 2005 did just that. The CONN DOT engineers at the meeting indicated that they were constrained by bridge design requirements to use the tested railing system with which they are familiar. They are willing to consider other railings if they meet strength requirements. The Bridge Design Manual used by the state lacks any mention of historic, artistic or architectural considerations or materials, which is unfortunate. This is a location where aesthetically pleasing design elements for the railings would be appropriate to employ. Unobtrusive standard tested materials may need to be used, however, since this is an emergency project.

The railing system proposed should be reviewed by architects or landscape architects to determine if a more aesthetically appropriate system is available which meets the testing standards of the state.

Contractor Requirements: At the public informational meeting held in February 2015 it was stated that the parks areas on either side of Eagleville Dam will remain open for the public's use during the bridge replacement.

In order to accommodate park users and their vehicles, the contractor selected for the project cannot be allowed to stockpile materials or park equipment, trucks or cars in the parks. Nor can materials, equipment or vehicles block access to the riverbanks or trails which could preclude use by boaters, hikers or fishermen.