

Bridge authority looking to separate highway lanes with median barriers

By Dotti Farrington

Median barriers for driver safety on the Claiborne Pell (Newport) Bridge, air-conditioning for toll collectors, town water for all workers, rescue training and crackdown on toll cheaters were topics at the monthly meeting on Aug. 8 of the Rhode Island Turnpike and Bridge Authority (RITBA).

Median barriers are being studied for design as part of RITBA's long-term improvement program. Designs and bids for the barriers are due soon.

Work totaling nearly \$26.5 million, of which \$10.6 million, or about 40 percent, has been completed, is being pursued under 11 contracts dating from 2003 through this summer, according to the authority's summary from Christine Callahan, chief financial officer.

Both cooling and heating improvements are being planned for toll booths, where collectors have been sweltering or shivering during extreme weather conditions because of long inadequate connections that do not bring the benefits of the administrative building's central heating and cooling system to the toll booths.

Executive Director Earl "Buddy" Croft and Engineering Director Peter Janaros were assigned to contact appropriate services with requests for proposals for the work to be done soon.

Town water

The authority is working with town officials to bring municipal

water to the RITBA administrative complex at the Jamestown toll plaza of the Pell Bridge. Staff members at the facilities have been using bottled water for about 20 years because of contaminated well water. "They have to use hand disinfectant after they wash with the water there," David Darlington, board chairman, told authority members.

According to RITBA, town Public Works Director Stephen Goslee said that an authorization for the extension of town water from several years ago still is valid and can be activated. The town water department has policies barring extension of municipal water to new customers. It was not clear if the extension would need ratification by the town's Board of Water and Sewer Commissioners.

Bridge and town authorities are reviewing options to determine the best route for extension of the water system, and how crossing bridge ramps or the toll plaza might be avoided to connect at the RITBA building. The work is expected to cost the authority about \$300,000 to have the town do the work, with the town requiring a 300-foot loop connection in addition to a direct 400-foot pipe for the system. Hitting some ledge or shale is expected to be involved in the pipe dig.

Richard Eannarino, of Jamestown, authority vice chairman, suggested they ask about the reasons for the loop so should it involve some benefit to the town, the town might share some of the costs. Officials estimated the work will take about two months, after official town permission is established.

Rescue work

The authority delegated its staff to offer first responder training to Jamestown fire and emergency workers after hearing a report about such bridge rescue orientation being conducted for Newport personnel and State Police. Eannarino said Jamestown's rescue operations by volunteers "is phenomenal" and the volunteers should have the option of whatever services RITBA can provide.

Toll cheaters

Drivers who fail to pay tolls are "an emerging national issue" for toll collectors, Croft commented as part of his monthly report, noting the Violations Enforcement Summit Conference of the International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association (IBTTA) he attended a few weeks ago in Boston, and a similar one he is scheduled to attend in Vienna in October.

When Croft and RITBA leaders were asked to define the extent of toll cheating at the Pell Bridge, they declined, saying information might encourage more to try toll avoidance.

The international organization estimates "only" about one percent is lost to cheaters, but that amounts to more than \$1 billion a year lost in toll income worldwide. Its reports from the Boston conference included examples about violators in luxury cars and drivers who mooned surveillance cameras. Violators also threw insects and other critters, play tokens and odd items into toll collection machines. The organization is looking for new devices and practices to curtail the thefts by omission or by prank substitutions.

Other items

Darlington credited Croft and his staff for coordinating the recent press conference, which the chairman termed effective, to report about the safety of RITBA's two bridges after the bridge collapse in Minneapolis.

Croft reported he was arranging for a three-day management review by industry peers to rate the effectiveness of the RITBA organization and to identify possibilities for improvement.

The authority postponed a decision to hire a public relations firm from among applicants interviewed in recent weeks; and members are considering ways and possible advisors for review of six proposals received on handling investments for its operations.

Janaros gave RITBA directors a detailed explanation about the main cable inspections being conducted "with excellent results." He described the cables as structures of 2,600 wires, each the size of adult fingers, which are bundled with a unique covering of mylar and fiberglass sheathings, held with resins and covered with a three coat paint system.

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