CITY OF CONCORD

REPORT TO MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL

FROM: Beth Fenstermacher, Director of Special Projects & Strategic Initiatives

DATE: February 24, 2025

SUBJECT: I-93 "Bridge Park" Feasibility Study

Recommendation:

Accept this report.

Background:

In the early 2000s, the NH Department of Transportation ("NHDOT") began planning and permitting work for the widening of Interstate 93 located between the junction of Interstate 89 in Bow to approximately Exit 15 in Concord, known as the I-93 Bow-Concord Project. For various reasons, the project was delayed for several years.

In 2022, NHDOT held a series of meetings with the Greater Concord Chamber of Commerce, the City's Transportation Policy Advisory Committee ("TPAC"), and City Council. The purpose of these meetings was to reintroduce the I-93 Bow-Concord Project to the community for the purposes of securing public input on key design details.

During the aforementioned community meetings, members of the public expressed interest in having the I-93 Bow-Concord Project include a "Bridge Park", similar to the concepts presented in the City's 2006 Opportunity Corridor Master Plan. Specifically, the Bridge Park would be an elevated platform constructed over the I-93 rights-of-way intended for passive recreational activities, and pedestrian connectivity between Downtown and the Heights.

During its November 14, 2022 meeting, the City Council directed City Administration to solicit proposals from the City's on-call engineering consultants for a potential Bridge Park. On April 28, 2023, the City Council appropriated $200,000 to cover the consultant costs for the Feasibility Study. In late 2023, a consultant team led by VHB was selected to complete the Feasibility Study.

Discussion:

At the commencement of the Study, the consultant team and City Staff met with NHDOT to review the latest I-93 project plans, and to discuss constraints and opportunities for the proposed Bridge Park. In December, 2023, the team also met with private property owners that could be impacted by potential Bridge Park designs, including Brixmor, the NH Historical Society, and Granite Center LLC (the Duprey Companies). CSX, who owns the railroad corridor running

parallel to I-93 in Concord, reviewed the project information and provided guidance to the City. However, CSX did not partake in any meetings about this project. Feedback from the property owners was very supportive, and valuable information was presented for the consultants to move forward with the Study and conceptual design development.

An initial public input session was held on February 20, 2024. Over 60 participants attended the session, which included a brief presentation of existing conditions followed by guided break-out sessions for participants to provide input in smaller groups. While every suggestion was reviewed and considered by the consultant team, the following list summarizes the more prominent objectives that came out of the meeting:

- Span over railroad and highway corridors;
- Create an attractive public space with views of the Merrimack River;
- Reduce noise resulting from the widened interstate;
- Include vegetation and pedestrian amenities on the structure;
- Connect to the Merrimack River Greenway Trail (MRGT) and points east;
- Provide space for "social mixing" to occur; and,
- Create an attractive statement as the gateway to the Capital City.

In addition to the information compiled during the public input session, the consultant team identified the following opportunities and constraints to consider while developing the conceptual design alternatives:

Opportunities

- Enhanced visual connectivity to the river from downtown;
- Deck portion could provide public space above the river; and,
- Bridge portion would provide river views and ADA accessible pedestrian/bicycle connection to the east side of the river and the MRGT.

Constraints

- With the exception of Healy Park, the City does not own property between Storrs Street and the Merrimack River;
- Existing infrastructure, including the I-93 corridor, CSX Railroad corridor, and electric utility lines:
- Environmental considerations, including rigorous permitting requirements along the river, floodplain, shoreland and wetland impacts, and existing contamination; and,
- Cost (initial construction and long-term maintenance).

Design Alternatives

The consultant's scope of work included development of three alternatives and associated conceptual level cost estimates. The alternatives were presented to NHDOT staff and at a public information session on February 4, 2025. The presentation is attached, which includes detailed information and renderings, summarized below.

Alternative 1 – Multi-use bridge, 24 feet wide with designated pedestrian lane and bicycle lanes, with intermittent programmed areas as desired (i.e. seating areas)

Alternative 2 – Bridge with Deck Park, same bridge layout at Alternate 1, with the addition of a park on the river side of the highway with sufficient space for active and passive uses (i.e. seating areas, grassy areas, paved areas for markets and food trucks, etc.)

Alternative 3 – Depress I-93 and add an expansive at-grade Deck Park. In the early 2000s, the State, as part of its I-93 alternatives analysis, had explored potentially depressing the elevation of I-93 between Exits 13 and 14. However, the State opted to not pursue that concept due to public safety concerns with depressing the highway below the flood elevation of the Merrimack River, as well as infrastructure concerns associated therewith. Therefore, when presented with Alternative 3, the NH Department of Transportation subsequently determined that it was a non-viable option for the State of New Hampshire for the reasons noted. Additionally, it was determined that encapsulating I-93 to facilitate Alternative 3 would result in additional infrastructure needs to properly ventilate the enclosed area, thus presenting significant additional capital, operating, and maintenance costs for the State. Therefore, although the consultant team prepared Alternative 3 in accordance with public input received at the 2024 meeting, due to the NHDOT's determination that this alternative was not acceptable to the State, the concept was not fully developed beyond determining alignment and depth of the highway / railroad depression.

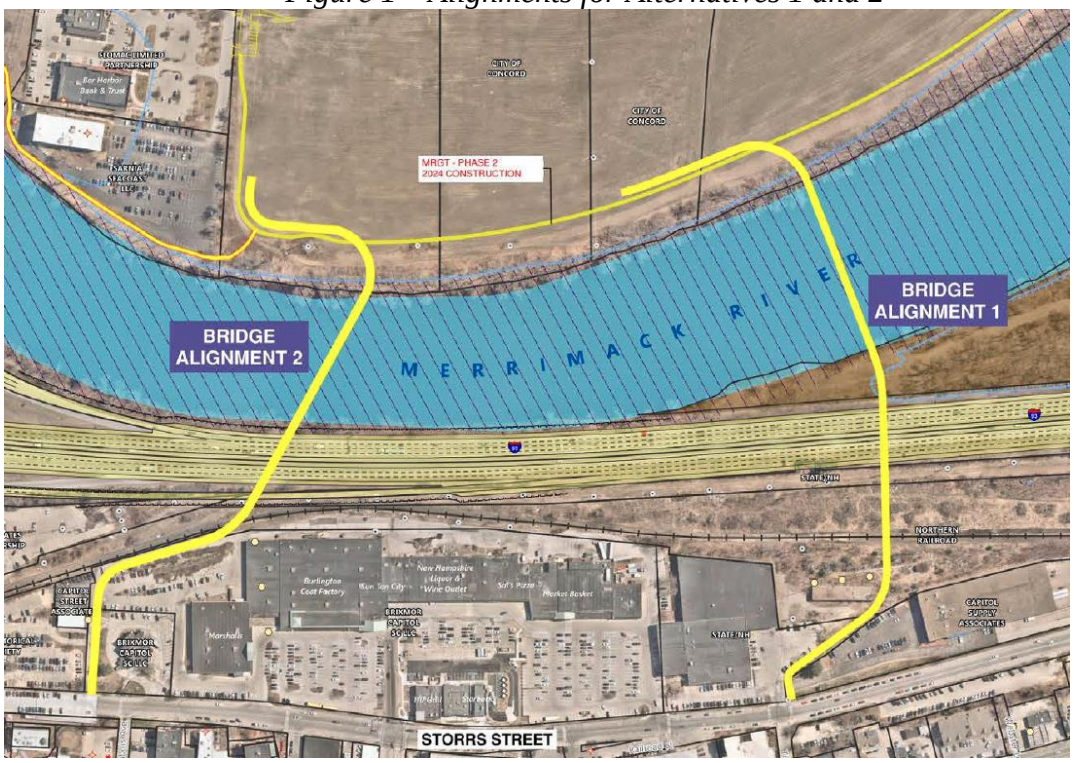
Location

For Alternatives 1 and 2, the consultant identified two alignment locations (see Figure 1 below):

Bridge Alignment 1 (southerly alignment) – the Storrs Street entrance would begin south of the NH State Liquor Commission building across from Theatre Street. A ramp would be constructed along the existing parking lots, and then cross the railroad right-of-way, utility corridor, highway, and river. The easterly entrance connects to the Gully Hill Fields section of the MRGT. The total structure length is approximately 3,000 linear feet (0.6 miles).

Bridge Alignment 2 (northerly alignment) – the Storrs Street entrance would begin just north of the Bank of America, in the vicinity of the Dubois Avenue intersection. A ramp would be constructed heading easterly, then following the railroad right-of-way before crossing the rail corridor, utility corridor, highway corridor, and river. The easterly entrance connects to the MRGT south of 6 Loudon Road. The total structure length is approximately 2,000 linear feet (0.4 miles).

Figure 1 – Alignments for Alternatives 1 and 2



The consultant analyzed different structural concepts based on site constraints and desired aesthetics. The conceptual design mimics mountain views for travelers on I-93, and provides opportunities for views of the State House, the River, and the adjacent conservation lands, and also blocks noise and views of the highways for users of the structure (see Figures 2 and 3 below, and more detailed in the attached presentation). The deck park is located closer to the river to reduce noise impact from the highway, and is approximately 18,000 square feet (similar in size to Eagle Square).

Figure 2 - Alternative 1 Multi-use Bridge (shown at the southern alignment)

Figure 3 - Alternative 2 Multi-use Bridge with Deck Park (shown at the southern alignment)

Figure 4 – View from highway, mimics mountain views

Cost Estimates
Alternative 1 (Bridge) is estimated to cost approximately $75,590,000.

Alternative 2 (Bridge and Deck Park) is estimated to cost approximately $114,660,000.

Alternative 3 (Depressed Highway and At-Grade Bridge Park): A cost estimate was not prepared for this option as this alternative would not be supported by the State due to public safety and infrastructure concerns associated with depressing I-93 beneath the floodplain elevation of the Merrimack River.

Other Existing / Forthcoming Pedestrian Connections Across the Merrimack River to Existing Riverfront Recreational Facilities
In light of the significant logistical and financial challenges associated with Alternative 1 ($75,590,000) and Alternative 2 ($114,660,000), it is important to note that the City presently has pedestrian connectivity across the Merrimack River at Loudon Road and Manchester Street which provide access to existing riverfront recreational facilities at Kiwanis Park, Terrill Park, and Gully Hill Road. As an alternative to a new bridge / bridge park, the community could consider advancing already planned improvements to existing pedestrian connections and associated riverfront recreational facilities, as presently included in the City's Capital Improvement Program, to achieve the community's recreational and economic development goals.

With this potential alternative in mind, it is important to note that the City is currently designing proposed improvements to the Loudon Road Bridge across the Merrimack River as part of Capital Improvement Program Project #588 which includes a new 14' wide shared path on the north side of the bridge to support the extension of the Merrimack River Greenway Trail (MRGT) from the City's Sunflower Fields at Gully Hill Road to Downtown, as well as interconnection of existing City riverfront recreational facilities at Kiwanis Park, Gully Hill, and – eventually - Terrill Park. Per the City's FY2025 Capital Improvement Program, the Loudon Road Bridge Project (CIP #588) is currently scheduled to be constructed in City FY2026 at a cost of $23,246,940, of which $18,357,552 (or 79%+/-) will be paid by the State and Federal government. The Loudon Road Bridge Project has been in the works since 2015.

Further, the City is working with the NH Department of Transportation on additional pedestrian improvements between the Loudon Road Bridge and Downtown which will further facilitate and improve pedestrian connectivity between the east and west sides of the Merrimack River. Subject to ongoing discussions with the State and design of interstate highway improvements, these improvements will be undertaken by the State as part of the forthcoming I-93 Bow-Concord Project.

Please see Figures 5 and 6 below for more information.

Figure 5 – Loudon Road Bridge / Merrimack River Greenway Trail Improvements (NHDOT)

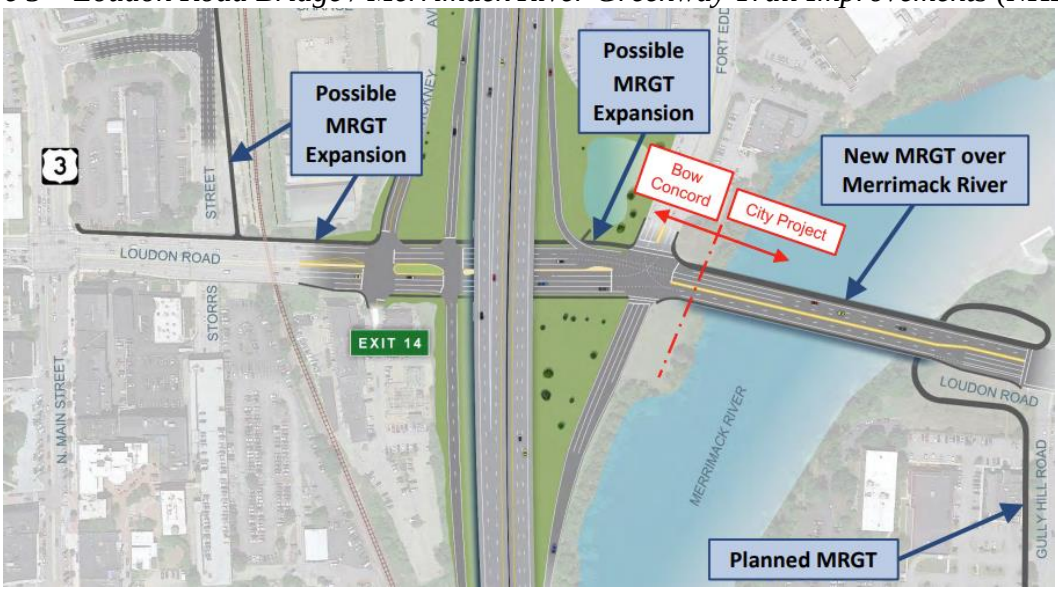


Figure 6 – Example Pedestrian Improvements for Loudon Road Corridor beneath I-93 which may be implemented as part of the I-93 Bow-Concord Project (TPAC Report to City Council 9/30/2022)

Further, the City has plans to extend the Merrimack River Greenway Trail (City CIP #543) from Terrill Park to the Gully Hill Road Agricultural Fields. Specifically, the City is pursuing grant opportunities to fund this expansion. In addition to linking the City's existing riverfront recreational facilities at Kiwanis and Terrill Park, this future ±0.33-mile extension will create a continuous ±3.5-mile loop whereby pedestrians may circulate between Loudon Road, Manchester Street, and Downtown by utilizing the Merrimack River Greenway Trail, existing bridges over the Merrimack River at Loudon Road and Manchester Street, as well as the Downtown sidewalk system. Please see Figure 7 below which articulates this concept.

Figure 7 – Pedestrian Loop formed by Merrimack River Greenway Trail, Bridges at Loudon Road and Manchester Street, and Existing Downtown Sidewalk System

Next Steps

Following the presentation to City Council, the consultant will finalize the I-93 Bridge Park Feasibility Study. However, given the $75,590,000 - $114,660,000 cost estimate, a new bridge park across I-93 and the Merrimack River would require an extensive amount of non-City

funding to move forward. The availability and viability of potential non-City funding sources is unclear.

The forthcoming 14-foot wide shared path to be constructed on the Loudon Road Bridge as part of City CIP #588 will provide a much-improved pedestrian connection between Downtown and the Heights. Additional improvements to the Loudon Road Corridor in the vicinity of Exit 14 are anticipated as part of I-93 Bow-Concord Project will further facilitate and enhance pedestrian connectivity between Downtown and the Heights. Further, forthcoming extensions of the Merrimack River Greenway Trail (City CIP #543) will further improve these existing connections between Downtown and the Heights, as well as to existing riverfront recreational facilities located a Kiwanis Park, Terrill Park, and Gully Hill Road. In coordination with forthcoming improvements to the Loudon Road Bridge (CIP #588) and Merrimack River Greenway (CIP #543), staff notes that extensive improvements for Kiwanis Park (CIP #60) and Terrill Park (CIP #59) have also been programmed in the City's Capital Improvement Program.