

South Portland traffic study to consider ferry service to Portland

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SOUTH PORTLAND — Regional planners are looking for ways to improve travel along the busy Broadway corridor from Mill Creek to Bug Light Park, including the possibility of adding cross-harbor ferry service to Portland.

The planners have launched a transportation study, including a community survey and planned public meetings, to maximize mobility and safety along a peninsula artery that carries about 20,000 cars daily, including students at Southern Maine Community College.

The Cushing's Point Transportation Study will encompass driving, walking, biking and public transit options in an area of the city that's targeted for improvements in Destination 2040, the long-range plan of the Portland Area Comprehensive Transportation System.

The results of the study, due next year, will inform the city's pending One Climate Future plan with neighboring Portland, said Milan Nevajda, planning director in South Portland. The plan calls for more sustainable development that includes making motor vehicle traffic more efficient and promoting low-carbon alternatives such as riding a bicycle or taking the bus.

“The Broadway corridor is a critical circulation backbone in the city and this study will help us understand how to optimize it for all users,” Nevajda said. “We also expect that the study area will be a very dynamic part of the city over the next 10 to 20 years.”



The Cushing's Point Transportation Study will encompass driving, walking, biking and public transit options in the busy Broadway corridor between Mill Creek and Bug Light Park. *Portland Area Comprehensive Transportation System*

Planners are asking community members to complete an online survey now and participate in an online public meeting on Nov. 9. More information about both is available on the Greater Portland Council of Governments' website.

A second public meeting will be held in March to present recommended improvements and receive feedback. Final recommendations and an implementation plan will be included in a final report to be released early next summer.

The \$82,000 study is funded by PACTS, a regional planning agency, and the city of South Portland. It will expand on previous studies that analyzed bicycle and pedestrian facilities, public transit access and traffic safety, said Chris Chop, transportation director at the council of governments.

“This study’s focus is different,” Chop said. “(It’s looking at) how to make the most of existing road infrastructure to allow people to more efficiently move in and through the area’s neighborhoods.”

The study is expected to address community concerns about increasing traffic on the waterfront end of Broadway that has hampered some efforts to develop housing and other projects in the study area.

Planners hope to reduce congestion and promote alternative modes of transportation as a way to preserve walkable residential neighborhoods in a city that's anticipating increased development and population growth from 25,000 residents today to 29,000 by 2040.

The study will analyze existing traffic patterns, signal operations, bus service, bicycle access and pedestrian infrastructure such as the Greenbelt Walkway, which runs the length of the peninsula and connects to the Eastern Trail. And it will include an exploratory feasibility analysis of ferry service, or marine transit, across Portland Harbor to the Old Port.

The idea of re-establishing ferry service between the two cities has been discussed for years, harkening back to an era before bridges eradicated the need for a ferry between Portland's waterfront and what is known today as the Ferry Village neighborhood in South Portland.

More recently, the late John Cacoulidis pitched a gasp-inducing plan to build a \$900 million high-rise convention center on former shipyard land in the study area that called for a cable-car system across Portland Harbor.

PK Realty Management purchased the 30-acre tract in 2018 and has offered to help pay for the study. Jennifer Packard, president of PK Realty, said the study will factor strongly in the decisions her company makes in developing the mixed-use Liberty Shipyard Project.

"We think it's really important information for us to have, as well as for the city and the region," Packard. "We want to understand all of the constraints and possibilities of developing that property based on actual data analysis."

For that reason, Packard said, she's concerned that the study is being conducted during a pandemic that has greatly altered business and social activity and changed traffic volumes and patterns. As a result, she's expecting traffic engineers and planners to consider historical traffic data as well.

Packard also prefers the term "water transit" to ferry service because many people envision larger boats like those used by Casco Bay Lines, the quasi-governmental agency that serves the Casco Bay islands. She noted that water transit in other cities around the globe includes boats that carry about 30 people each and succeed in getting many cars off the road.

Packard said water transit between South Portland and Portland should be able to operate as a business to serve the community year round and not be driven by tourism alone.

“The question is, how do we make it a viable transit option and not just a nice thing to have when tourists are here?” Packard said.

Casco Bay Lines has offered to help with the study and provide whatever information might be useful, said Hank Berg, general manager of the ferry service. Casco Bay Lines has never studied the possibility of transporting people between Portland and South Portland, Berg said.

Whether Casco Bay Lines would have any involvement in establishing cross-harbor ferry service remains to be seen.

“This is just the beginning of an extensive process and it isn’t clear at this time whether Casco Bay Lines would have any involvement in future phases of this work,” Berg said.

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