

Cutlines:

1. What a dedicated bike path might look like on Chappaquidick, as envisioned by a team of Northeastern University engineering students.
Courtesy Husky Transportation Engineering

2. A sharply divided group listened to the engineering students outline a study evaluating options for bicycle accommodation.

Students evaluate Chappy bike path

By Steve Myrick

A group of Northeastern University engineering students presented a study project that outlined a possible design for a bike path on Chappaquiddick to a sharply divided group of Chappy residents in the selectmen's meeting room of Edgartown town hall on Friday, Feb. 26.

The students said they studied four possibilities to accommodate bikes on the rural Island, and determined that a dedicated multi-use path along the north side of Chappaquiddick Road and Dike Bridge Road was the most suitable solution.

Several of their conclusions, as well as the study itself and the town's role in it, were sharply questioned by residents who oppose a bike path.

The earlier publication of a notice for Friday's meeting created a furor among opponents of a bike path on the town's small, eastern island community. The notice appeared to inform people of a public hearing called by the planning board, an impression that planning board administrator Georgiana Greenough said was a mistake.

Bike path proponents said the presentation was no more than an opportunity to learn about alternative possibilities at no cost to the town.

A group of 20 Chappy families donated money to fund the study. At Friday's meeting, highway superintendent Stuart Fuller assured the group that no town money has gone into the project, including payment for placement of notices in local newspapers.

Presenting a bike path

Even those who oppose the bike path said they were impressed by the presentation (available at mvtimes.com) of five senior Northeastern University civil engineering students, titled "An evaluation of multi-modal alternatives for Chappaquiddick Road and Dike Bridge Road."

The students used a systematic approach to evaluate four options: doing nothing; painting shared-lane markings, called sharrows, on the existing roads; adding bike lanes on the existing roads; and creating a dedicated bike path running roughly parallel to the road.

The students concluded that doing nothing would not improve conditions, sharrows were impractical because of the narrow 10-foot width of the travel lanes, and bike lanes were impractical for the same reason. The study concluded that a dedicated 8-foot wide bike path on the North side of the roads, blended into the landscape by a buffer of trees and shrubbery, was the most desirable solution.

The students cited traffic statistics that show more than 70 percent of bike-car collisions happen in travel lanes, while only 1 percent occur on dedicated bike paths. They also cited a study showing bicyclist injuries rise sharply when in a collision with cars going faster than 30 miles per hour. They said they observed numerous vehicles traveling faster than the speed limit on Chappy roads. The student study concluded that a path on the north side of the roadway would require slightly relocating the road in three places to avoid wetlands. The students said a path on the south side of the road would require far more road changes.

Bitter about bikes

The Northeastern students were well aware they were walking into a bitter 30-year-old dispute.

“We were trying to give our objective view,” said Adam Blaser said, the team leader. “We’ve understood what people’s concerns are and what people’s desires are. Taking all that into consideration, and treating this like an engineering study, instead of a political debate, is

the way we tried to approach this.”

Summer resident Bob Colvin, who has been active in promoting a bike path, thought the presentation was very constructive. “There are two elements we’ve always believed in,” he said. “One is facts, and number two is democracy, a real sense of what people want in the most democratic way possible, and that of course is our next step.”

About 20 people were on hand when the 11 am meeting began. Roger Becker, who opposes the bike path, said that the weekday morning time for the meeting, and its location at town hall, made it difficult for other opponents to attend. He questioned the premise of the study. “Since they were set up by proponents of the bike path, they were told to just look at putting a bike path down the road from the ferry to the bridge,” Mr. Becker said. “They’ve dismissed the alternatives. My feeling was they went with what the Chappy path committee assigned them to do.”

On Monday, Mr. Becker submitted a letter (available at mvtimes.com) during the regular meeting of the board of selectmen, asking the board to “rein in” highway superintendent Stuart Fuller.

Mr. Becker said that Mr. Fuller had arranged to have the students promote and defend a bike path, and that he made it appear that the town is supporting the plan. “I am asking you to have him cease and desist in such an effort, and announce that the town, at your direction, will no longer sponsor such promotion,” Mr. Becker told selectmen.

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