



COASTAL TRAILS COALITION SUPPORTS GILLIS BRIDGE LANE STRIPING

April 28, 2023

Coastal Trails Coalition fully supports the new traffic pattern on US Route 1 over the Gillis Bridge. We believe that, when complete, the project will create a significantly safer space for all bridge users, including pedestrians, cyclists and motorists.

The appearance of the new lane striping on the Gillis Bridge and the approaches in Newburyport and Salisbury was a surprise to many. Though all required permissions for the project were obtained, more communication of the coming changes to the public would have been beneficial.

The project represents best practices in design for cycling infrastructure and is consistent with the Complete Streets policies of both MassDOT and the City of Newburyport. Previously, with no designated bike lanes, pedestrians, bicyclists, wheelchair users and other non-motorized users traveling both north and south, were forced to share a narrow 5-foot sidewalk with a steep curb that directly abutted a high-speed traffic lane. The Route 1 speed limit there is 40 mph and many drive over the bridge even faster.

Non-motorists use the bridge regularly as it connects the popular and heavily-used Newburyport Clipper City Rail Trail and Salisbury Eastern Marsh Trail. Over the past few years as the rail trails and shared-use paths in Newburyport, Salisbury, Amesbury and Newbury have been extended and connected, there has been a tremendous increase in the number of pedestrians and bicyclists crossing the Gillis Bridge. MassDOT recommends that separated bike paths be used when daily volumes of vehicles exceed 6,000 or operating speeds exceed 25 mph. Traffic on the bridge greatly exceeds both these thresholds. Protected bike lanes are needed and the project plan includes installation of a line of flexible plastic posts in the striped buffer between the new bike lanes and the auto travel lanes. This will protect both the bike lanes and the sidewalk and make travel over the bridge much safer for all.

The project also has significant traffic safety benefits on both the Salisbury and Newburyport sides of the bridge at three key locations: the intersection of Route 1 and First Street/Friedenfels Street in Salisbury, the Merrimac Street on-ramp, and the Winter Street entrance to Route 1 in Newburyport.

The area near the intersection of Route 1 and First Street/Friedenfels Street in Salisbury is documented by MassDOT data as a crash cluster. This location has been especially dangerous and congested after bridge openings in summertime. The new design's creation of a single northbound lane over the bridge has eliminated the merge at First/Friedenfels and will make that location safer for all drivers.

On the Newburyport side, traffic on the ramp to the bridge from Merrimac Street previously merged into fast moving through traffic on Route 1 with limited space and poor sightlines. The longer merge lane onto the bridge from Merrimac Street and the merge to one lane before the Route 1 Summer Street exit makes this section safer and easier to navigate.

Similarly, southbound drivers entering Route 1 from Winter Street in Newburyport previously had severely limited sightlines when merging. They are now able to enter safely in their own travel lane.

Concerns have been raised about traffic congestion resulting from the new design. MassDOT's analysis shows that one lane of traffic in each direction on the bridge is more than sufficient to carry the current volume. Also of interest, daily traffic volumes on the Gillis Bridge in the summer are comparable to the volumes on High Street. Traffic studies conducted in August 2019 show that 18,221 vehicles crossed the bridge daily compared to 18,436 on High Street at Rawson Avenue. If High Street can handle this volume with one lane in each direction, Route 1 should as well.

Concerns have also been expressed that eliminating one of the travel lanes on the approaches to the bridge will cause increased backups during bridge openings. MassDOT estimates that during bridge openings the single southbound lane on the Salisbury side will displace 50 vehicles, increasing the length of the backup. We acknowledge that this will cause slightly longer delays for some travelers, but believe that this is a small price to pay for the overall safety benefits of the project.

In summary, Coastal Trails Coalition believes this is a good project for Newburyport and Salisbury residents and visitors, no matter how they travel – by car, by bike, or on foot. It improves safety for everyone using this section of Route 1.

Sincerely,

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Coastal Trails Coalition is a non-profit corporation whose mission is to assist in developing the Coastal Trails Network, a 30-mile network of rail trails and bikeways connecting the communities of Amesbury, Newbury, Newburyport and Salisbury.