



COUNTY OF MERCER

McDADE ADMINISTRATION BUILDING
640 SOUTH BROAD STREET
P.O. BOX 8068
TRENTON, NEW JERSEY 08650-8068

BRIAN M. HUGHES
COUNTY EXECUTIVE

TEL: (609) 989-6518
FAX: (609) 278-4819

Roni Browne Katz
52 Maddock Ave.
Titusville, NJ 08560

March 4, 2011

Dear Ms. Katz,

Thank you for your email dated Feb. 28, 2011 regarding the future of the Bear Tavern Road bridge over Jacobs Creek on County Route 579 in Hopewell Township.

As you are well aware, replacement of the bridge and realignment of the roadway has been under consideration for decades, certainly long before I have had the privilege of serving as County Executive. In fact, maps dated to 1966 show the acquisition of the right of way in the area surrounding the bridge, and over the more than 40 years since that acquisition, Hopewell Township has blossomed into a growing and prosperous community. As a result, the bridge and the roadway leading up to it have grown increasingly unable to safely support modern vehicles and the increased volume of traffic that goes hand in hand with a flourishing community. The replacement of the bridge is tied not to our corporate neighbors' growth or even its future in Mercer County; the replacement of the bridge is necessary to safely accommodate existing traffic, and with a keen eye toward the future.

Hopewell Township's growth did not happen overnight, and was not the product of any one entity. The County has no jurisdiction over Hopewell Valley Regional School District, but a school was constructed decades ago on Bear Tavern Road. Mercer County likewise has no jurisdiction over your town's zoning decisions; that is a function of municipal government. Hopewell Township decided the region in question could adequately accommodate corporate neighbors. It is Hopewell Township, not Mercer County, that endorsed construction of a new state-of-the art medical center in your town. It is Hopewell Township that has given site-plan approval to a new housing development. It is Hopewell Township, not Mercer County, which seeks to extend sewer service. As your County Executive it is my job to ensure that the concerns in my purview are addressed. And in this case, that issue is that a County road and bridge is safe for travel not just for the nearby residents but for the thousands who drive on Bear Tavern Road in your growing community.

You also asked why the County would move forward with design phase of the new bridge and road realignment while an application for historic designation is before the state. In a letter from the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection dated Sept. 9, 2010, the Historic Preservation Office concluded, after its review of the Archaeological Survey performed by an independent consultant recommended to the County by State DEP, that our consultant's assessment was accurate, that the property in question had "low potential to contain significant archaeological resources", and that the area in question had already been subject to previous disturbance during installation of sewer lines. As a result of this determination, a decision was made to move forward with the design phase of the project. Please understand, however, moving ahead with the design phase entails consideration of all potential environmental impacts including the potential historic designation of the area. In essence, the design phase seeks to identify all of the constraints associated with the project including costs, available right of way, and wetlands impacts.

Additionally, you describe your preference for one (Alternative 3B) of the other 14 options that had been considered by the group of citizens, Hopewell officials, County officials and others who weighed the many options for the new bridge. Alternative 3B would maintain the existing roadway alignment but proposes to essentially split the structure down the center, widen it and strengthen the supporting members. This option was strongly considered as one of the alternatives in the Historic Bridge Alternatives Analysis Report. However, due to the original configuration of the structure, the extent of deterioration and addition of numerous repairs, rehabilitation would require the substantial, intricate strengthening and select component replacement of main and secondary members. Because of the level of strengthening that would be required, a rehabilitation effort on the bridge would significantly affect the original design and workmanship of the existing bridge and cause it to lose all historical significance. The required work on the original trusses also does not comply with the Secretary of the Interior Standards. In the Historic Bridge Alternative Analysis, to which you refer, the "Impact on Historic Fabric of Bridge" under Alternative 3B states: "The rehabilitated truss elements would only support their own dead weight. The non-functioning trusses would eliminate the historical use of truss elements. This alternative would severely impact the historic fabric of the bridge and would not meet the Secretary of the Interior Standards." Consequently, a rehabilitation option was not deemed viable.

Not only would Alternative 3B destroy the historic significance the bridge itself, the bridge would still be deemed "functionally obsolete" and "structurally deficient". In layman's terms, *Functionally obsolete* refers to bridges that do not have the lane widths, shoulder widths, or vertical clearances adequate to serve traffic demand or bridges that may not be able to handle occasional roadway flooding. *Structurally deficient* refers to bridges needing significant maintenance attention, rehabilitation, or replacement. Additionally, Alternative 3B would increase the maximum weight load of the bridge to only 15 tons, which is still not adequate to accommodate a loaded school bus or fire truck. Even if the County continued to pursue this option, it would only extend the life span of the bridge for a few years after which time other options would need to be considered.

A new structure would have a projected lifespan of approximately 75 to 100 years and would meet the standards mentioned above. At the turn of the 20th Century, Mercer County's

population was only 100,000 people. Today, we're nearly 365,000 residents strong. Making decisions in government often entails balancing many competing interests, and it is my responsibility to all the residents of Mercer County to weigh those interests. A new structure on an alignment that is safer and far more efficient for accommodating existing and future traffic, including travel by local residents and businesses and emergency response vehicles, and that offers school buses a more direct route to the Bear Tavern School balances the needs all our constituents. The County plans to either relocate the existing bridge to another area of the township for use as a pedestrian bridge in a park or to rehabilitate the bridge consistent with Secretary of the Interior Standards for use as a pedestrian bridge and scenic overlook. Either option will not only ensure the historical value of the existing bridge is retained, but allow it to be used and admired for many generations of Mercer County residents in the future.

As for the professionalism and courtesy of my staff, I am aware that a number of key personnel have responded to your letters and emails, and that you've spoken at great length with them via telephone. My staff has responded with the utmost professionalism and courtesy and will continue to do so. In the spirit of transparency, my staff has put together a comprehensive information package on this project, including all the steps leading to where we are today, and that information has been readily available on our website for several years.

Finally, you inquired as to why the Request for Proposal (RFP) for the design phase of the project was not made public. As you may understand, this project requires specific, intimate knowledge of not only structural engineering and bridge design but an understanding of the potential historic and environmental circumstances. For this reason, Mercer County issued the Request for Proposal (RFP) as a Professional Services contract to three qualified firms that have this knowledge and capability in these areas. While open, competitive RFPs are typically posted on the County website, Professional Service contracts are exempt from bidding under New Jersey statute 40A:11-5. Therefore, the County chose not to post the RFP for the design of Jacobs Creek Bridge, just as we would not post other non-competitive contracts that require highly specialized, professional skill sets.

I hope this information is helpful and again, I thank you for your correspondence.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Brian M. Hughes". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Brian M. Hughes
County Executive