

Oregon Inlet opened in 1846, when a big hurricane along the Outer Banks caused water to rush from the sound to the ocean. Since that time, the inlet has migrated steadily south at a rate of around 100 feet per year. A good measure of the inlet's journey is the Bodie Island Lighthouse, which once stood at the margin of the inlet but is now 3 miles away.

In 1962, the Bonner Bridge replaced the ferry that shuttled people and cars across Oregon Inlet. Construction of the bridge, with its high fixed-span, instantly stopped the long history of inlet migration. But sand continued to pour into the inlet from the north, the driving force behind the inlet's southerly migration, creating ever-expanding navigation and dredging problems.

After 40 years, the Bonner Bridge is rapidly deteriorating and two possible replacement alternatives are being evaluated: A bridge immediately parallel to the current bridge and a 17 mile-long bridge that would extend into Pamlico Sound, run along the backside of Pea Island and connect to Hatters Island at Rodanthe.

The initial cost of constructing the Pamlico Sound Bridge is much higher than that of the Parallel Bridge. But the overall long-term costs of a Parallel Bridge greatly exceed those of the Pamlico Sound Bridge. This is because the Parallel Bridge requires the continued protection and maintenance of State Highway 12 on Pea Island. Over time, as the shoreline erodes back in response to a rising sea level, the cost of stabilizing Pea Island will become higher.

Construction impacts to wetlands and sea grass beds are essentially the same for each bridge. But the long-term environmental cost of the Parallel Bridge is significantly greater, again due to the necessity of protecting and maintaining State Highway 12. As a result, natural habitats in the Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge will be extensively impacted.

Navigation for fishing boats will be maintained for both bridges. The Parallel Bridge, like the Bonner Bridge, will require the inlet to stay in one place. As a result, navigation will remain difficult and dredging costs will increase as sand continues to pour into the inlet. The Pamlico Sound Bridge is designed to allow the inlet to migrate, as nature demands, and the navigation channel will simply be allowed to move from span to span over the coming decades. To our knowledge, the NCDOT-designed Pamlico Sound Bridge is the most environmentally sensitive bridge proposed on any barrier island, and the NCDOT is to be applauded for its ingenuity and foresight.

When comparing overall cost, environmental impacts and navigation concerns, the Pamlico Sound Bridge is clearly superior to the Parallel Bridge. But also consider that the Pamlico Sound Bridge will...

- Allow Pea Island to respond to the rising sea level,
- Allow the natural barrier island system to remain and be visited by tourists, and
- Provide a much more reliable transportation corridor connecting the eight villages to the south of Oregon Inlet to the mainland. Keeping Highway 12 on the barrier

island as required by the Parallel Bridge means that it will be closed ever more frequently as sand-bearing waves overwash the island during even small storms.

...And the Pamlico Sound Bridge is unmistakably the best choice.

But Dare County officials strongly oppose it for two reasons. One is fear that the Pamlico Sound Bridge will take money away from a proposed new bridge to the Outer Banks over Currituck Sound. While this may be true, a new Currituck Sound bridge will only serve to increase the already terrible congestion problems that plague the Outer Banks during the summer months.

The second reason for the County's opposition is that the Pamlico Sound Bridge will require removal of the terminal groin at the north end of Pea Island. Many county officials assume that the terminal groin is improving navigation. But the opposite is true. If the groin is removed and the inlet is allowed to migrate, dredging will become less expensive and navigation will become easier and safer.

We believe a lot of misinformation is being provided by Dare County, and urge the NC General Assembly, NCDOT and Governor Easley to encourage the Federal Highway Administration to select the Pamlico Sound Bridge Alternative.

In so doing, the state will make a strong commitment to protecting and preserving the outstanding natural, cultural and economic resources of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore for future generations of North Carolinians.

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