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# Historic Comstock Bridge to Re-Open

by Bailey Seddon

Colchester and East Hampton residents, take heart: The two-year Comstock Bridge reconstruction project is nearing its completion.

The historic bridge – portions of which are estimated to date back to the 1700s – is currently partially open to pedestrians, with the structure expected to be completely opened in about the next month.

The \$1.1 million project began at the end of the winter in 2009 and is “basically a one-of-a-kind project” for the Department of Transportation (DOT), said spokesman Kevin Nursick. Nursick said reconstructing a wooden bridge is not the type of project the DOT is typically involved in but the agency was happy to do so as the bridge had so much “historical significance.”

The 90-foot covered wooden Howe truss bridge spans the Salmon River, with half in Colchester and the other half in East Hampton. It was first shut down in 2005 when it was inspected and thought to be unstable. At that time, the bridge was repaired with the addition of two steel high beams, which bore the weight of the bridge, making it safe for foot traffic again. From then until 2009 the bridge remained open while the state looked into funding for a broader reconstruction of it.

In 2009 funding finally came through, with the help of state Rep. Gail K. Hamm (D-East Hampton and Middletown). Of the \$1.1 million cost of the project, 80 percent came from the National Historic Covered Bridge program and the other 20 percent from the state, Nursick said.

Joe Gresko, a spokesman for Hamm, said she made sure the state went forward with assigning the DOT to be the caretakers of the bridge. She also went through the process of applying for the federal funds that paid for most of the project, he said.

Work began on the project in March 2009. Once it started, workers had to completely disassemble the bridge, piece by piece. This was done by pulling it apart, 10 feet at a time, and storing the pieces of the wooden structure in the bigger of the two parking lots at the site. Once that was done, workers replaced the “old Deteriorating material with new components as needed,” said Nursick. Half of the restored

bridge is now composed of new materials, with the other half of original pieces. The reconstruction incorporated “some modifications to better strengthen the structure,” but half of the original bridge was retained “maintaining the historic context of the structure,” Nursick said. A carpenter was also brought in to work on the bridge to make sure the job was done right.

This project was also unique to the DOT because it was “all basically done by hand,” which made it take longer, Nursick said. The project would likely have been completed earlier, but the severity of last winter’s snowstorms delayed some of the work, he said.

Nonetheless, state and local officials are relieved the project is coming to a close and the bridge can be used again.

“I’m thrilled that it is going to be reopened,” said Colchester First Selectman Gregg Schuster. Schuster said the bridge is an iconic landmark in the area, one he used to visit as a kid to go fishing with his family.

This is not the first time the historic bridge was shut down. In the 1930s it was closed for renovations, and then again in the 1970s.

The bridge is now partially open to pedestrians and in the next month or so will be completely opened, Nursick said. The landscaping portion of the project will be completed in the spring, he added. The landscaping will improve the aesthetics of the property, including the planting of flowers and grass at either end of the span, and will not limit pedestrian use of the bridge.

It was important to town and state officials to keep as much of the original bridge as possible because it has significant historic value.

“It has a real historic context,” Nursick said.

Nursick said the bridge was built in 1873 for \$3,958, a cost that was shared by East Hampton and Colchester. The towns shared the bridge for 61 years, before it became state property in 1934. Nursick said there are portions of the bridge that possibly even date back to the 1700s.

“Maintaining the character of the bridge and allowing families across the state and New England to enjoy safe travel over this historic landmark was the **driving force behind this effort**,” Hamm said. “A trip across the bridge constitutes a journey through the history of this



**The Comstock Bridge, which spans the Salmon River from East Hampton to Colchester, is expected to completely reopen next month after a two-year renovation project. The bridge was built in 1873 and is one of only three remaining covered bridges in Connecticut.**

region, when our citizens traveled on horseback and stagecoach.”

Another unique aspect of the Comstock Bridge is that it is one of only three remaining covered bridges in Connecticut and the only one that still supports its own weight.

The bridge is “one of those charms that Con-

necticut has,” Nursick said. “It really is a local gem that not a lot of outsiders know about.”

Gresko said Hamm “is ecstatic” that the bridge is almost complete and looking forward to taking part in the ribbon-cutting ceremony, which he said would likely take place in the spring.