

**City of Keene**  
**New Hampshire**

**MUNICIPAL SERVICES, FACILITIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE**  
**MEETING MINUTES**

**Wednesday, January 27, 2021**

**5:30 PM**

**Remote Meeting via Zoom**

**Members Present:**

Michael Giacomo, Vice Chair  
Randy L. Filiault  
Bettina A. Chadbourne  
Robert C. Williams

**Staff Present:**

Elizabeth A. Dragon, City Manager  
Rebecca C. Landry, IT Director/Assistant  
City Manager  
Don Lussier, City Engineer  
Kürt Blomquist, Public Works  
Director/Emergency Management Director

**Members Not Present:**

Janis O. Manwaring, Chair

Vice Chair Giacomo read the executive order authorizing a remote meeting: Emergency Order #12, issued by the Governor of the State of New Hampshire pursuant to Executive Order #2020-04. Pursuant to this Order, Vice Chair Giacomo called the meeting to order at 5:33 PM and Committee members stated their locations and whether alone.

**1) Verbal Update – Deteriorating Conditions on Thompson Road – City Engineer**

Vice Chair Giacomo welcomed the City Engineer to provide an update on the deteriorating conditions on Thompson Road, for which the Engineer first briefed this Committee on in October 2020 after residents notified the Public Works Department with concerns. Thompson Road is in the southeast corner of Keene, it is very narrow at maximum 12.5 feet wide, and is the steepest roadway in the City with portions reaching a 23% grade, which has caused deterioration over time. When residents raised concerns last year, the Public Works Department found that the slope Thompson Road was built on had been settling. The City Engineer used images to demonstrate how the surface of Thompson Road was built on that steep slope and where the slope sits now compared with when the road was constructed. Since concerns arose in 2020, a geotechnical engineer studied the slope and provided recommendations as to what would be required to repair the roadway. To date, in an effort to stabilize the roadway and ensure it safe for passing vehicles, the Public Works Department has installed jersey barriers to divert vehicle weights away from the settling portion of the slope and create a one lane roadway, and placed signs at the top of Thompson Road indicating that drivers should yield to traffic coming uphill.

With the geotechnical information at hand, the City Engineer presented the two possible options to address these conditions. Option #1 is to repair the roadway in place. This option would require constructing retaining walls upslope, downslope, or most likely both. The City Engineer showed photos of potential retaining wall types with varying advantages and associated costs; for example, walls made of precast blocks are less expensive to install compared to vegetated walls

that could bend into the slope. The estimated cost of option #1 is \$850,000 to \$1.3 million, depending on wall type and more significantly on whether the Council chooses to permanently widen the roadway as a part of the rebuild, which Staff recommended to result in a safer roadway with better conditions long-term. Advantages and disadvantage of option #1 are:

- Advantages:
  - Would result in significantly fewer impacts to private properties both to maintain access during construction and permanent effects.
  - Would provide the opportunity to permanently widen the roadway up to 16-18 feet, which is the bare minimum for two cars to pass.
  - Would maintain for easier upkeep the water main under the roadway in the City's right-of-way that provides fire protection to the five homes on Thompson Road and domestic water to two of those five residential properties.
- Disadvantage:
  - Winter maintenance challenges would continue because Thompson Road would remain the steepest road in Keene post-construction.

The City Engineer continued presenting option #2, which is to create new access to Thompson Road. After learning the costs of option #1, Public Works Department Staff investigated the potential for a more cost effective alternative that would also solve the problem of long-term maintenance. The City Engineer used an image to demonstrate that the first section of Chapman Road, from Eastern Avenue to the sharp corner, was built on a former privately owned railroad spur that went to a quarry in Roxbury and is still in the City's right-of-way. This would allow the opportunity to build new access from the corner of Chapman Road to the middle of Thompson Road, resulting in the two homes closer to RT-101 turning right to reach their driveways and the others would turn left. The \$1.3 million estimated cost of option #2 would not be less than option #1. The advantage and disadvantage of option #2 are:

- Advantage:
  - Would result in a much milder slope that would simplify and lessen the cost of long-term maintenance.
- Disadvantage:
  - Would have substantial property impacts. First would be to take an entire relatively new private residence and the property it sits on. Second would be to acquire land under conservation easement to construct the public roadway, which would have significant legal hurdles.

Next, the City Engineer explained that the Director of Public Works would install preliminary Public Works Department slope monitoring equipment to begin periodically – the City Engineer stated most likely quarterly for the first few years – monitoring fixed points in the slope to document over time whether the slope is stable in its current condition or settling more, which would indicate how quickly options #1 or #2 would need to be programmed in the Capital Improvement Program (CIP). Then he said the long-term repair of Thompson Road would be likely budgeted into FYs 2023-2029. When it comes time to enact an option the City Engineer recommended that the City Council choose option #1, as he could not see the advantage of long-term maintenance ease outweighing the significant impacts to property owners with option #2, especially with both options projected to cost nearly the same.

Councilor Filiault asked, based on the conditions on Thompson Road at present, whether the City Engineer anticipated that the roadway would deteriorate rapidly over the next one and a half years. The City Engineer stated his opinion that the slope does not present an imminent catastrophic failure but rather that he thinks it is a slow moving geotechnical phenomenon. If he anticipated a cataclysmic event then he would be recommending at this meeting to take immediate drastic measures. The City Engineer said that the purpose of placing survey monitoring equipment once the ground thaws this spring is to confirm urgency.

Councilor Chadbourne expressed worry that this might not be a slow-moving concern given evidenced climate variability. If something catastrophic were to occur despite the precautions and temporary fixes enacted to date, the Councilor questioned the City's liability. The City Engineer did not venture to guess liability and deferred to the City Attorney, who was not present at this meeting. To date, the City Engineer stated that all insufficiencies of Thompson Road were addressed to the standard of NH road statutes per the City's responsibility to ensure the road is passible and safe. Councilor Chadbourne stated that due to safety, she was concerned with not adding the project to the budget before 2023.

Councilor Williams asked about preserving access to the homes on Thompson Road during rebuild, assuming option #1. The City Engineer stated that one reason that both options are expensive is due to the need to preserve residential access during construction by placing temporary retaining walls that allow maintenance of one lane of traffic while the other side of the road is repaired. The \$300,000 difference in estimates depends on whether the Council chooses to make the temporary access permanent to widen the road.

Vice Chair Giacomo thought that most retaining walls would be needed downslope and noted that most of the downhill land is owned by Antioch University. The City Engineer confirmed the land's owner and said there would be permanent property impacts downhill and at minimum temporary impacts uphill that would be permanent if the Council elected to permanently widen the roadway.

Councilor Filiault asked whether Staff were aware of any unallocated funds in reserve should this project need to be programmed sooner in the CIP and the City Engineer said not to the magnitude of funds under discussion. The Director of Public Works and Emergency Management Director, Kört Blomquist, stated that unfortunately this would be a general fund project and while the City has done well capturing and reusing as much as possible through the unallocated fund balances, he was unaware of significant funds available. The Director of Public Works continued that if a catastrophic event occurred – such as the 2005 flood – then Staff would request that the Council work with the Finance Director and City Manager to seek emergency funds, whether from an unallocated fund balance, the general fund, or a bond. If a significant enough disaster occurred, the Director of Public Works said FEMA money exists for that reason. Councilor Williams commented that he wished FEMA made funds available for preventative maintenance to save money overall.

Vice Chair Giacomo opened the public hearing.

Pat and/or George Walker, residents of Thompson Road, attempted to comment but were barred due to technical difficulties. They were offered options to write the City Clerk with comments and/or call the City Engineer.

Jessica Pierannunzi of 67 Thompson Road expressed concern because a significant portion of the residents there are seniors and said that therefore the area is visited frequently by emergency services that must navigate heavy and wide equipment up the hill. As the road continues narrowing with preventative measures like the jersey barriers, she said that emergency equipment and snow plows would continue damaging the roadway. She said that trees formerly acted as natural retaining walls but that the trees are dying because they no longer reach the roadway and therefore the slope is eroding further downhill toward the river. Ms. Pierannunzi was concerned with waiting until FY 2023 and thought that action should be taken sooner versus watching quarterly stability sensors. She stated that the property owners on Thompson Road continue to be very concerned as they have seen dramatic change over the past two or three years. The City Engineer assured Ms. Pierannunzi that the Highway Division knew the road's condition and the need to maintain access, which must be passable to emergency vehicles, and although it is difficult to maintain he said they do their best to keep the road open, though he stated that Public Works vehicles must back-up the steep slope.

Councilor Terry Clark asked whether there is any other infrastructure running under Thompson Road besides drainage, because if there is little under the road he questioned if best to consider the long-term and excavate the hill more to lower the grade and widen the roadway. The City Engineer said that the water infrastructure he mentioned was the only thing of significance under the roadway but that there are also downhill drains that serve catch basins uphill. The City Engineer continued that lowering the roadway's grade in its current footprint would drive-up significantly both costs and property impacts. If the goal were to lower the slope, then he said that option #2 would be more logical, because the current footprint is constrained by the needing the roadway to meet the residences' existing elevations.

With no further comments, Vice Chair Giacomo closed the public hearing.

Councilor Filiault moved to accept the update about deteriorating conditions on Thompson Road as informational, which Councilor Chadbourne seconded.

Councilor Filiault said it was clear that the project is essential and stated his opinion that it should be prioritized in the budget because it would be less expensive to address the problem before the slope collapses.

Vice Chair Giacomo asked how to address this before the next regular CIP review. The City Manager said that this is an off-year for CIP review but that projects would be reviewed as a part of the operating budget this year. She said this was less a matter of getting the project into the CIP and more about choosing what other project(s) to postpone in the CIP to accommodate this one. She suggested that the Council could take a bond from the fund balance outside the budget process but she was unsure she recommended that option unless it emergent because that is a significant amount to take from a fund balance. The City Manager's short-term recommendation was to allow her to provide an update during review of the operating budget.

The motion passed with a unanimous 4-0 roll call vote.

There being no further business, Vice Chair Giacomo adjourned the meeting at 6:07 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,  
Katryna Kibler, Minute Taker  
January 29, 2021

Additional Edits by,  
Terri M. Hood, Assistant City Clerk