

Community Advisory Group Meeting #1 Summary Decatur Bridge

January 18, 2024

1-4 p.m.

Onawa Community and Recreation Center - Kelly Hall
320 10th Street Onawa, IA 51040

The first of two planned Community Advisory Group (CAG) meetings was held at the Onawa Community and Recreation Center, 320 10th Street in Onawa, Iowa on Thursday, January 18, 2024, from 1-4 p.m. The meeting was held to kick off community engagement for the Decatur Bridge Location and Environmental Study. Twenty (20) CAG representatives attended. Invitations to participate in the CAG were distributed by email to about 30 community members representing a cross-section of local interests, representing both the Nebraska and Iowa sides of the study area.



The meeting began with a project overview presentation delivered by the project team, followed by small group discussions where participants were encouraged to share thoughts and considerations for the study. A community-wide survey draft was shared with attendees for the opportunity to provide feedback prior to the survey launching publicly the following week (February 1).

CAG attendees were pre-assigned to four small groups. Group assignments attempted to offer each group diverse perspectives with regard to which side of the river their respective organizations are focused. Each group had a lead consultant team facilitator and DOT note-taker.

A list of CAG participants and a summary of what was learned is included in the following pages.

Decatur Bridge CAG Meeting #1 Small Group Discussion Participants:

- **Group 1: Blue** – Facilitated by Michelle Winkelmann, notes by Ben Trenne and Dawn Knott, Nebraska DOT
 - Mark Siecke - Decatur Village Board Chair
 - Patrick Prorok - Monona County Emergency Management Coordinator
 - Jenn Collison - Onawa Chamber of Commerce Director
 - Mark Kwikkel - Owner of Pop-n-Docs
 - Ann Chytka - Burt County Hwy Superintendent
- **Group 2: Yellow** - Facilitated by Shari Cannon-Mackey, notes by Jessica Felix, Iowa DOT
 - Don Warren - Village of Decatur
 - Vince Phillips - Monona County Board of Supervisors
 - Judy Connealy - Future of Decatur Foundation
 - Marty Fonley - West Monona & West Harrison Superintendent
 - Adam Hadden - Burgess Health Center Dir. of Public Health
- **Group 3: Green** - Facilitated by Andrew Ferdon, notes by Dylan Pryor, Iowa DOT
 - John Casady - Public Works Dir. City of Onawa
 - Jane Judt - Decatur Museum President
 - Dawne Price - Nebraska Indian Community College Dean of Student Services
 - Charlie Persinger - Monona County Economic Development Partnership
 - Kevin Ewing - Monona County Sherrif
- **Group 4: Red** - Facilitated by Brandon Schmit, notes by Kirk Harvey, NDOT
 - Ralph Skarin - City of Onawa Mayor Pro Tem
 - Eric Nick - Burt County Sherriff
 - Matt Connealy - Future of Decatur
 - Clint Weaver - City of Onawa Economic Development Director
 - Doug Chafa - Iowa Dept. of Natural Resources (IDNR)

The following is what the study team heard during the small group discussions organized by key topics. Bolded terms indicate topics that were reiterated by several meeting participants.

Need for a Bridge

- The Decatur Bridge provides **vital connectivity** and quality-of-life benefits to both communities on both sides of the river.
- Access to **healthcare** was top of mind for nearly all participants as the closest area hospital is in Onawa. The nearest facilities on the Nebraska side are about 40 miles away in Pender and Blair.
 - Home healthcare aides from Burgess Medical Center in Onawa cross the bridge to care for patients in the Decatur area.
- Onawa offers the closest emergency helicopter landing pad – carrying patients to Omaha or Sioux City. Blair offers the closest alternative landing area but requires a 45–50-minute drive.
- Both states support each other with **emergency services and mutual aid**, as needed. Decatur fire crosses the bridge to provide emergency support with brush fires in rural areas of Iowa.
 - Onawa currently employs four people from Decatur on the emergency response team. If the crossing were closed, the loss of access could lead to a reduction in these staff members.

- Several **essential needs and economic opportunities** exist that residents of Decatur access across the bridge, including jobs/major employers, education, groceries and auto parts. The following were named specifically by CAG participants:
 - Burgess Health Center
 - Casinos (four vans per day transport employees from Walthill and Macy)
 - Universities (administration as well as college students in Nebraska tend to work in Onawa)
 - Hard steel (Norfolk)
 - Westendorf Manufacturing in Onawa
 - Grocery distributors (Hy-Vee requires 10 trucks per day)
 - Central Valley Ag
- In 2011 when the bridge was closed for six months, participants recalled several people who lost jobs due to the increased travel time required to get from Decatur to Onawa. The time and cost of travel outweighed the income.
- Businesses on both sides of the river depend on **commerce/shoppers** traveling across the bridge. The sentiment was that without the bridge, businesses would be required to close.
- **Agricultural considerations** – farmers have lands on both sides of the river and use the bridge to access them. Peak use of the crossing by farm vehicles occurs during spring planting and autumn harvest.
- Access to **quality of life/recreation** is also facilitated via the bridge. The area is a popular outdoor recreation/camping stop. The nearest movie theater for Decatur residents is in Onawa.
- Removal of the existing bridge would impact both communities' opportunities for future growth and economic development.

Existing Bridge Deficiencies

- The existing bridge is considered **too narrow** for semi-trucks and large farm equipment to safely cross.
 - When semi-trucks and farm equipment meet traveling on the bridge, one is forced to back up to allow the other to pass.
 - Trucks carrying haybale loads have hit the rails, dislodging haybales creating dangerous roadway obstructions.
- Frequent crashes on the bridge were noted.
- Existing bridge **load requirements** are lower than current standards. This is a challenge for transporting area agriculture products and results in industries considering other locations to develop. Unpermitted loads (loads that may exceed the posted weight restrictions) cross the bridge regularly.
- The **open-grate decking** can be unnerving for some. It is dangerous for bicycles and even motorcycles to cross.
- The grade/slope of the roadway is rather steep coming into Decatur and contributes to increased travel speeds. Improvements to the bridge should consider flattening the grade.
- Snow removal, if not done correctly, can further restrict the already narrow travel lanes.
- Riverbank stabilization is needed.

Travel Time

- Without the bridge, travel times from Decatur to Onawa would be about 100 minutes (1.5-1.75 hours) according to participants requiring the use of the other nearest river crossings.
- Decatur access to the Onawa hospital increases to about 50 minutes, compared to the 10–15-minute travel time using the existing crossing at Decatur.

Bridge Location

- Participants generally agreed that a new bridge should be **as close as possible to the existing bridge**.
- Attendees indicated a preference for a new bridge being located on the north side (upstream) of the existing bridge to avoid the sewer treatment facility and a regionally popular public park/campground.
- General sentiment was that a replacement bridge should **continue to carry travelers through Decatur downtown** – an economic driver for the community that must be maintained.
- Participants voiced a desire to **minimize impacts** to public and private property.
- The Village of Decatur is considering plans to provide more development near the river. Two Rivers Development is planning a four-plex apartment complex north of 7th Street near the base of the bridge.
- The study team should review the long-term comprehensive plan for the Village of Decatur to map out future developments and opportunities for growth as part of the alignment screening/evaluation process.

Bridge Closure and Detours

- Overwhelming feedback indicated a bridge closure, especially for an extended period of time, would be damaging to both Decatur and Onawa residents.
- Permanent closure would be devastating to the Decatur community.
- A short-term closure could be acceptable, but participants voiced a strong need to **keep access open through construction for as long as possible**. Short-term closures were categorized as one to three months. However, with the last one-month closure, participants recounted some people lost their jobs because of increased travel time/cost.
- **Bridge permanent or temporary closures would result in financial impacts** to low-income families who don't have the funds to travel farther to the next closest crossing.
 - A bridge permanent or temporary closure would have a huge impact on students and staff at the Nebraska Indian Community College (NICC); 70% of NICC students are considered low income.
- A preference for the closure to occur during the winter months when the campground is closed was noted.
- Decatur City Park, south of the bridge, offers the most convenient public **boat ramp** and is the only one available in the immediate area. CAG members indicated the need and desire to keep the park and boat ramp open during construction to support its use by emergency services.
- Highway 175 is a recommended detour for Interstate 29 closures.

Bridge Users

- Few pedestrians cross the bridge; however, some NICC students walk across to work. There is no pedestrian accommodation on the existing bridge; therefore, pedestrians are intermixing with vehicular traffic.
- The open-deck grate is dangerous to bicycles and even motorcycles to travel across.
- Participants inquired as to whether the existing bridge could remain open as a bicycle and pedestrian path/crossing of a new bridge is constructed.
- An individual mentioned there may be a planned bicycle trail on the Iowa side, but a connection across the river was not included.

Community Perspective, Seasonal Events and Impacts to Consider

- Participants shared that Decatur and Onawa are really **twin cities**, a river divides them, but they function together as one – providing partnership and support for vital EMS and fire services.
- While the existing bridge does have historical interest but is not seen as a “trademark” or “landmark” for Decatur. Most participants believe the community would prefer a functional bridge and replacing the existing bridge should not upset the community.
- **Tourism** draws many people to the area, particularly April 1 through October 31 (weather dependent).
- The area has **four seasonal draws**, including summer holidays (4th of July and Labor Day along with every summer weekend people come to recreate). Fall draws visitors for deer and duck hunting. Ice fishing tournament & chili contest bring people into town during the winter. April begins the draw of visitors wanting to be on the river in the spring.
- Events to consider: Memorial Day, River Front Days (Father’s Day), harvest season (hauling grain), Monona County Fair (mid-July), Fireworks July 3rd and Pow Wow weekend.
- For Pop-n-Docs, Labor Day and Memorial Day are important.
- The Decatur Museum is working to place a commemorative marker near the historic bridge on the Nebraska side.
- CAG members see this important project as an opportunity to invest in the community and to build momentum for future economic development and community enhancements.
- Some participants inquired about widening the existing highway through Decatur.
- An eagle’s nest was identified just east of the existing bridge.