

**MINUTES OF THE JOINT INFORMATIONAL EAST PASS BRIDGE
MEETING WITH HARBOR CRA,
HARBOR AND WATERWAYS BOARD, AND
PUBLIC WORKS AND SAFETY COMMITTEE
DESTIN CITY HALL ANNEX
OCTOBER 23, 2025**

The purpose of this meeting is to receive a presentation and hold discussion on the planned replacement of the Destin/Marler Bridge, with emphasis on aesthetics, functionality, and local stakeholder and provide the input to FDOT.

- **Call to Order & Pledge:**

The meeting called to order by City Engineer, Robert Tomasek with the Pledge of Allegiance immediately following.

- **Introductions / Roll Call**

- **City staff:**

- City Manager Larry Jones
- Deputy City Clerk Kim Montgomery
- Kimberly Kopp, City Attorney
- Robert Tomasek, City Engineer
- Daniel Butler, Principal Planner
- Sherry Burney, Planning
- Steve O'Connor, Deputy Director.

- **Board/Committee members:**

- Bill McKissick, Harbor Board / Harbor & Waterways.
- Jim Green, Harbor and Waterways & Harbor CRA
- John Stevens, Harbor CRA & Harbor and Waterways
- Ryan Holloway, Harbor and Waterways
- Jim Wood, Public Works/Public Safety
- Guy Tadlock, Harbor and Waterways & Harbor CRA
- Marcie Bell, LPA and Public Works/Public Safety

- **Citizens / Guests:**

- Bradley Touchstone, attending as an interested citizen and bridge architect, not representing his employer (AECOM).
- RJ Gorman Marine Construction, LLC

- **Background on Project**

- City Engineer explained that FDOT is planning to replace the Destin/Marler Bridge, similar in concept/scale to other major coastal bridge replacements.
- Mr. Bradley Touchstone previously discussed the opportunity to pursue a design that is more than a standard “pre-stressed I-girder” bridge, prompting City Council to ask the three boards to meet jointly and provide input.
- Council has already directed staff to:
 - Convene this joint committee for discussion.

- Follow a set of five steps toward forming a bridge-focused committee and engaging in the FDOT process.
- **Presentation – Bridge Design & FDOT Process (Bradley Touchstone)**
 - Mr. Touchstone, Bridge Architect with approximately 35 years’ of experience; former National Practice Lead for Complex Bridge Design at AECOM).
 - Clarified he is not speaking for AECOM or FDOT, but as a citizen with professional expertise and emphasized:
 - Replacement of this bridge is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that will shape the community’s skyline and identity for the next 100+ years.
 - FDOT is strong at solving defined problems, but citizens must help define the problem, which is more than “getting from A to B.”
 - The bridge crosses one of the most important and iconic waterways in the area, with extremely high boat interaction; design must acknowledge:
 - Drivers and vehicles.
 - Pedestrians and cyclists.
 - Boats and navigational safety.
 - **Examples of Bridge Impact & Aesthetics**
 - Provided several examples of projects he has worked on or is familiar with, illustrating:
 - Bridges as icons (e.g., Glass City Skyway in Toledo).
 - Bridges that stitch together urban fabric and prioritize pedestrians (e.g., Second Street Bridge in Austin).
 - Use of color, texture, and form as “low-cost or no-cost” enhancements (e.g., Hastings Bridge in Minnesota).
 - Enhanced user experience via overlooks, themes, and stopping points (e.g., Tappan Zee Bridge pedestrian/bike features).
 - Possibility of overlooks and viewpoints at mid-span overlooking the bay and gulf.
 - Importance of pedestrian and cyclist experience, not just vehicle throughput.
 - **FDOT PD&E Process & Aesthetics Levels**
 - FDOT is currently in the PD&E (Project Development & Environment) Study phase:
 - Evaluating alternatives.
 - Conducting environmental analysis.
 - Determining project scope and funding needs.
 - During PD&E, FDOT:
 - Identifies view sheds, key vantage points, and local impacts.
 - Evaluates tie-ins with adjacent roadways and long-term traffic impacts.
 - Seeks stakeholder input, where this committee and boards should play a major role.
 - FDOT uses aesthetic levels 1–3:
 - Level 1: minimal aesthetic consideration.
 - Level 2: some cohesive pier/structural detailing (typical, e.g., 331 Bridge).

- Level 3: higher emphasis on aesthetics in historic, urban, or visually sensitive areas.
 - Presenter believes Destin/Marler Bridge clearly qualifies as a Level 3 aesthetics project.
 - **Bridge Configuration Overview (FDOT Concepts)**
 - Proposed bridge is expected to:
 - Needs to be taller to meet Intercoastal Waterway clearance (around 65 ft vertical clearance).
 - Provide three lanes in each direction (for a total of six) with full shoulders and bike/pedestrian facilities.
 - Be roughly similar in scale to the Hathaway Bridge.
 - FDOT goal is to support a six-lane U.S. 98 corridor from Pensacola to Panama City where feasible.
 - Bridge will be designed for a 100-year service life, making initial choices critical.
 - **Bridge Type Options**
 - Compared standard AASHTO girder bridges (e.g., Clearwater Pass, 331 Bridge) with more refined solutions:
 - Standard girders result in many piers, long lines of beams and shadows, and create waterline footing hazards.
 - Discussed benefits of:
 - Longer spans and fewer piers in the water for:
 - Navigation safety.
 - Improved hydraulics (less scour, fewer vortex/sediment issues).
 - Better aesthetics and fewer “roosting” and jump-off points.
 - Trapezoidal box girders (concrete or steel) that:
 - Provide cleaner lines and monolithic appearance.
 - Allow for waterline or mudline footings that reduce hazards.
 - Integration of public art, historic/heritage imagery, and environmental themes into pier wraps, monuments, and railing details (examples from Florida and Minnesota).
 - Extradosed bridges as a potential option:
 - Span “sweet spot” around 500–700 ft.
 - Could provide longer clear channels, distinctive visual profile, and opportunities for lighting and iconic identity.
 - Emphasized the need to discourage people from jumping from the footings and reduce “play platforms” by preferring mudline or simple waterline columns over large, exposed pier tables.
- **Key Discussion Points from Boards and Public**
 - Channel Alignment & Navigation Safety
 - Several charter captains and boat operators described:
 - Strong, shifting currents under the existing bridge.
 - Narrow spans increasing collision risk.

- Incidents of boats being struck or pinned while under tow or in heavy current.
- Fewer, wider spans to improve safety and reduce congestion.
- Exploring shifting the navigation channel slightly west, if feasible, to separate harbor ingress/egress from main channel boat traffic and reduce conflicts near Crab Island.
- Concern for Coast Guard access and potential federal constraints on moving the federal channel.
- **Bridge Height, Grade, and Speed**
 - Discussion of:
 - Minimum 65-ft clearance for Intercoastal standards; note that very few local vessels require more clearance.
 - Whether additional height is necessary vs. effects on approach grade and landing locations.
 - FDOT's typical maximum grades (around 6%, with tradeoffs for 18-wheelers and pedestrians).
 - Concerns:
 - The draft concept assumes a 45-mph design speed, though the corridor has long operated at 35 mph speeds.
 - A three-lane bridge with full shoulders risks encouraging high speeds into a pedestrian-heavy harbor district ("building a speedway").
 - Potential mitigation:
 - Use of lane narrowing and other subtle traffic-calming design features on the bridge.
 - Short-term possibility of striping only two lanes initially and dedicating extra width to bike/ped facilities until/if three lanes are required in the future.
- **Landings, Local Streets, and Property Constraints**
 - Significant concern about the Destin-side landing:
 - Early conceptual layouts reportedly showed the bridge landing south of McGuire's, potentially cutting off access from Calhoun and Sibert and pushing more traffic toward the Stahlman Avenue intersection.
 - Fear that this could create a "bridge city" scenario, where the bridge dominates and degrades the historic harbor fabric.
 - Discussion of:
 - City-owned property north of the bridge and need to consider future uses (landing, marina, or other public functions) in the bridge design.
 - Comparison to Brooks Bridge in Fort Walton Beach:
 - FDOT used limited landing space and avoided major right-of-way takings (like Publix shopping center), demonstrating how geometry can be constrained but still workable.

- Consensus that local knowledge of traffic patterns, harbor operations, and neighborhood streets must shape bridge design decisions.
- **Funding, Timing, and PD&E Status**
 - PD&E reportedly initiated in 2023.
 - PD&E completion is currently expected around summer 2026, though some rescheduling has already occurred.
 - Update shared that a key PD&E milestone occurred in December 2024, with another major step planned for March/April 2026.
 - Important points:
 - Project is not yet funded; until funding is secured, construction is not guaranteed.
 - After PD&E, the project advances to FDOT’s programming and building list, where state and federal funding/politics become critical.
 - At some point, the city will need to engage legislative representatives to support funding requests and secure allocations.
- **FDOT & Consultant Coordination**
 - PD&E consultant identified as HNTB, with contact Brandon Bruner, PE.
 - Members requested the following:
 - FDOT provide copies of any PD&E “deliverables” completed to date so the committee has a background understanding.
 - PD&E consultant team are invited to meet with the City’s bridge committee, once formed, to discuss concepts and expectations.
- **Proposed “Bridge Aesthetics/Design Committee”**
 - Mr. Tomasek recommended creating a consolidated committee to serve as a Bridge Aesthetics / Bridge Design Committee to:
 - Represent the three boards and the broader community.
 - Develop a project-specific Aesthetic Design Guideline document, including:
 - Key view sheds and vantage points (e.g., Duke and Destin, jetties, Noriego Point, harbor fleet, Crab Island, etc.).
 - Desired user experiences for drivers, pedestrians, cyclists, and boaters.
 - Safety priorities (during and after construction).
 - Preferred bridge types, structural characteristics, and aesthetic themes.
 - Advocate for a Level 3 aesthetic classification with FDOT.
 - Serve as an advisory body during procurement and construction, monitor changes and potential value-engineering that could erode aesthetic or functional goals.
 - Strong recommendation to require:
 - A “pass/fail” aesthetic gateway in the FDOT design-build procurement:
 - Competing design-build teams must demonstrate compliance with the City’s Aesthetic Design Guidelines.
 - The committee would review and approve or reject concepts against those guidelines.

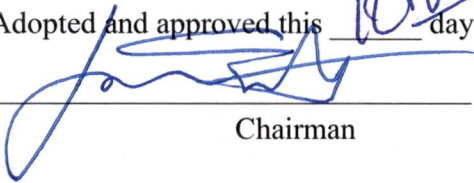
- Without such a gateway, aesthetics risk being treated as “recommendations” that may be discarded in a lowest-cost bid scenario.
- **Next Steps & Action Items**
 - **Council Resolution to Form Committee**
 - The City Attorney is tasked to prepare a resolution for City Council’s November 3 , 2025 City Council meeting to:
 - Formally create a bridge aesthetics/design committee (sometimes referred to as a “blue-ribbon panel”).
 - Define membership drawn from the Harbor CRA, Harbor and Waterways Board, and Public Works and Safety Committee.
 - Place the new committee under Sunshine Law and specify its scope.
 - **Board Appointments**
 - Each board/committee will, at its next regular meeting, nominate and appoint two members to serve on the new bridge committee.
 - The total membership will be kept to an odd number, with the presenter offering to serve as the “odd number” if appropriate.
 - **Contact with FDOT & PD&E Consultant**
 - City staff (City Engineer/Attorney) to:
 - Inform FDOT and HNTB that the city is forming a bridge committee.
 - Express the City’s expectation that the committee will:
 - Engage early with the PD&E team.
 - Provide stakeholder input on aesthetics, bridge type, view sheds, traffic impacts, and navigation issues.
 - Request existing PD&E deliverables (reports, concept layouts, etc.) for committee review.
 - Explore inviting HNTB/FDOT representatives to a future meeting to discuss the project in detail.
 - **Future Meetings**
 - Another bridge committee meeting is tentatively targeted for early January (date to be finalized once the council resolution is passed and members are appointed).
 - Staff will circulate the council-adopted resolution and confirm the next meeting date to all boards.
 - **Legislative Advocacy (Future)**
 - At later stages (post-PD&E), the city anticipates:
 - Engaging state and federal legislators to support funding.
 - Coordinating messaging on project importance, aesthetics, and economic/tourism impacts.
- **Sunshine Law Reminder**
 - City Attorney Kim Kopp reminded all board and committee members:
 - They are subject to the Sunshine Law.
 - Upon adjournment, members may not discuss the bridge project with each other outside of properly noticed public meetings.

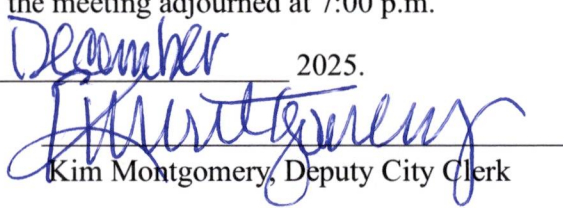
- After the November 3 council resolution, discussions will still be restricted for those appointed to the new bridge committee unless they are in a noticed meeting of that committee.
- Chair thanked Bradley Touchstone for his presentation and insights. The Board and Committee members, City staff, and the City Manager for their participation.

ADJOURNMENT:

With there being no further discussion, the meeting adjourned at 7:00 p.m.

Adopted and approved this 10th day of December 2025.


Chairman


Kim Montgomery, Deputy City Clerk