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D.C. official eyes UM bridge technology

Transportation chief has ear of Green Cabinet

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BANGOR DAILY NEWS PHOTO BY JOHN CLARKE RUSS

Ray LaHood, secretary of transportation, lifts one end of a 60-foot carbon arch during his tour of the University of Maine's Advanced Structures and Composites Center in Orono on Monday afternoon. LaHood was learning about the center's Advanced Engineered Wood Composite Center innovative bridge designs. With him (at right) are state Sen. Elizabeth Schneider, D-Orono, and U.S. Rep. Mike Michaud, D-Maine. Behind LaHood is Habib Dagher, director of UMaine's Advanced Structures and Composites Center and professor of civil-structural engineering. **Buy Photo**

ORONO, Maine — U.S. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood stopped short of making any commitments Monday afternoon before he left the University of Maine's Advanced Engineered Wood Composite Center.

But he also left with a pile of bound information booklets about the center and its many projects, including the "bridge-in-a-backpack," after he had a tour of AEWC's Advanced Structure and Composites Center and conversations with Gov. John Baldacci, U.S. Rep. Mike Michaud, and AEWC Director Habib Dagher.



In a brief interview after the event, LaHood said if and when the technology is found to meet standards set by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, the Department of Transportation could take a

more serious look at the center's bridge arches and how they can be used around the country.

"Obviously that's a very innovative approach," he said after watching a video and viewing demonstrations of the bridge technology. "Once [the center gets] that kind of certification or sign-off, we'll obviously look at it."

LaHood's visit, announced last week, had been in the works since Michaud met with LaHood last spring about the center's new bridge technology and

invited the secretary to UMaine. Michaud is a member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, the same committee on which LaHood served during his own congressional term.

The “bridge-in-a-backpack” technology — so called because of its light weight and the portability of its components — uses carbon-fiber tubes that are inflated, shaped into arches and infused with resin before being moved into place. The tubes are then filled with concrete, producing arches that are harder than steel yet resistant to corrosion.

Finally, the arches are overlaid with a fiber-reinforced decking and buried under several feet of dirt and sand.

LaHood had a chance to pick up one of the demonstration arches in the center, eliciting smiles from Baldacci and Michaud.

The composites center researchers have estimated their bridge’s carbon footprint to be about one-third less than that of a standard concrete bridge and one-fourth less than a standard steel bridge.

LaHood said he plans to take the information he received Monday about many of the center’s technologies to President Obama’s Green Cabinet, which includes LaHood and other administration officials such as the secretaries of energy and interior and the Environmental Protection Agency administrator.

He also mentioned inviting Dagher to meet with the Green Cabinet in Washington, D.C. Dagher testified last summer about wind energy before the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs.

During a press conference Monday afternoon, LaHood praised the work going on at the composite center.

“There is definitely a role for our government in what is going on here at this innovative incubator, where ideas really count and where the research is very important, and you are all on the cutting edge of new developments in transportation and in energy,” he told more than 100 UMaine faculty, students, staff and businessmen affiliated with the center.

One of those businessmen was Bangor native Brit Svoboda, the CEO and managing partner of the center’s spinoff company Advanced Infrastructure Technologies LLC, or AIT.

AIT plans to invest approximately \$20 million into continuing development and commercialization of the technology.

Svoboda said LaHood’s influence could make a difference when AIT goes to the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, which puts out specifications and standards for materials such as lumber, steel and concrete. Svoboda said the association does not have an approval system.

“It’s going to help us a lot for someone of his level to be able to go to AASHTO with what he has seen [in Orono],” Svoboda said.

Since his confirmation in late January, La Hood said he has traveled to at least 27 states and about 45 cities to look at new technologies.

Media members were not allowed to observe most of LaHood’s tour, but state Rep. Emily Cain of Orono said LaHood seemed interested in the composite center’s projects, asking questions about jobs spurred by the technology, as well as energy, recycling and efficiency.

“He saw a little bit of everything,” Cain said. “It seemed to me that the light bulb was going off, saying, this has universal applications. He seemed willing to bring it back to Washington.”

While the federal government may need more time to examine the bridge-in-a-backpack concept, it seems to be moving forward in Maine. The composites center came in as the low bidder for a bridge rebuild in North Anson, and work there is expected to begin soon. The first bridge in the nation to use the technology was built last year in Pittsfield.

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BANGOR DAILY NEWS PHOTO BY JOHN CLARKE RUSS

Habib Dagher, director of the University of Maine’s Advanced Structures and Composites Center and professor of civil-structural engineering, addresses the audience during U.S. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood’s visit to UMaine’s Advanced Structures and Composites Center in Orono on Monday afternoon. Behind Dagher (from left) are UMaine President Robert Kennedy; state Rep. Emily Cain, D-Orono; state Sen. Elizabeth Schneider, D-Orono; Gov. John Baldacci; U.S. Rep. Mike Michaud, D-Maine; and Transportation Secretary LaHood.