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CONTRIBUTED / GARIN BAKER

Renowned New York artist Garin Baker will be painting live at the Plein Air Art Festival's ending soiree in Yarmouth.



CONTRIBUTED / CATHERINE BICKFORD

An artist paints en plein air at last year's festival.

Controversial replacement of old bridge gets underway

By Maria Skillings
Times Record

Contractors began work this week on replacing the Frank J. Wood Bridge that crosses the Androscoggin River between Brunswick and Topsham, despite a multi-year legal battle with a local group that hopes a pending request to halt the project comes through.

Woolwich-based construction company Reed & Reed is expected to complete the \$49.9 million project by 2026. The Frank J. Wood Bridge will remain open during construction, but residents should expect some road closures in 2025.

The 91-year-old steel truss bridge will be replaced with a four-span steel plate girder and concrete structure. The new design includes sidewalks, wider shoulders, pedestrian viewpoints and lighting fixtures, according to Paul Merrill, Maine DOT director of communications.

The bridge replacement has been delayed for years by legal battles with the Friends of the Frank J. Wood Bridge, which has partnered with the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the

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Acclaimed NYC artist featured guest at next month's Plein Air Art Festival

By Sydney Richelieu

New York-based cityscape and landscape artist Garin Baker will be a

featured guest at the fourth annual Plein Air Art Festival next month in Yarmouth.

"I can't wait to get up to Maine and

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Bridge

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Historic Bridge Foundation to stop the project and preserve the existing bridge.

“From the very beginning, it has been the icon of Brunswick and Topsham,” said John Graham, the friends group’s president. “As time goes by, it has proved it would be significantly cheaper to rehabilitate. It doesn’t make taxpayer sense, and the bridge that’s going in there is not fitting for that location.”

The Federal Highway Administration determined in 2017 that a new structure would cost \$13.7 million and it would cost \$21 million to rehabilitate the existing structure, a 53% difference. In 2018, Federal Highway Administrator Cheryl Martin told Friends members that alternatives to replacing the bridge were no longer an option.

Merrill said the significant price increase of the new bridge – \$49.9 million – was because of legal delays as well as increases in construction costs.

“The Maine Department of Transporta-



JASON CLAFFEY / THE TIMES RECORD

Construction site at the Frank J. Wood Bridge.

tion received a final determination from the Federal Highway Administration in January that allows the department to replace the Frank J. Wood Bridge,” Merrill said. “This finding came after a years-long, exhaustive federal regulatory and

legal process. That process confirmed MaineDOT’s original conclusion that the safety, reliability and cost-effectiveness of replacing the bridge is the best solution.”

Topsham town officials said they sup-

port the “immediate” replacement of the bridge. Brunswick officials also have backed the project.

“The Frank Wood Bridge is experiencing advanced deterioration and has progressed to the point that a replacement is now necessary from a safety, economic and environmental perspective,” said Town Manager Derek Scrapchansky. “The replacement of the bridge is also critically important to the connectivity, economic vitality and quality of life for both Topsham and Brunswick residents. Local businesses in each town have been impacted due to customer safety concerns and other implications associated with posted weight restrictions.”

Merrill said construction of the new bridge is scheduled to finish in late 2026 but will be open to traffic earlier than that. He said the new bridge will last at least 100 years.

Members of the Friends of the Frank J. Wood Bridge are still waiting for a ruling on their injunction and said if they are denied they will have to go back to the drawing board.

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Plein Air

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enjoy the coastline, and continue our love affair with the unspoiled beauty,” Baker told The Forecaster. “Maine is such a great place to paint.”

The outdoor painting festival, Aug. 16-26, will conclude with a live paint event by Baker at the Plein Air Art Soiree.

Critically acclaimed for his art, Baker also is an instructor at the Arts Student League in New York City and runs a public art mural company. He has painted murals in Los Angeles, Chicago, Atlanta, Washington, D.C., New York and Denmark.

Baker has loved painting en plein air since high school, he said, when an art teacher would take his class out to the streets of New York City to paint.

The experience of painting outdoors is “visceral,” Baker said, igniting all the senses.

“Painting outdoors is the only way to understand and to put yourself into the situation of life,” he said. “Understanding that painting, two-dimensional art, is really not necessarily about the particular thing you’re painting, but about different life situations.”

New England plein air artist Eric Jacobsen will also be featured at the festival, and will instruct a 3-day workshop, “Adding Energy to Your Plein Air Paintings,” Aug. 24-26.

Meanwhile, artists will be painting on location throughout town during the

festival, and free morning and afternoon tours to see them at work will be held Aug. 26.

The festival is organized by the non-profit Artascope studio in Yarmouth. Executive Director Catherine Bickford started the festival in 2020, when, because of the pandemic, the art community couldn’t come together in studios. The festival started as a small outdoor

painting party, she said, and it has grown every year.

Bickford will lead a “Sketching from Life” mini class Aug. 17 and Aug. 24 to benefit the Yarmouth Farmers Market.

“I think it’s really fun to try to access drawing, even if you don’t think you can do it,” she said. “It’s a great way to relate to things in the world and make them more tangible.”

She emphasized the festival is not just for artists. It is a community builder, she said, and she hopes it will connect neighbors.

The festival also will include family-friendly activities, live music and food trucks. For more information and class and event tickets, go to artascope.org.

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