The New York Times

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, please click here or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. Order a reprint of this article now. »

November 17, 1985

# BRIDGE, AT 101, FOCUS OF DISPUTE

By REGINALD C. JOHNSON

A NEARLY two-year battle to save one of Westport's historic landmarks - a century-old swing bridge crossing the Saugatuck River - will likely reach a key stage Thursday at a hearing in Town Hall.

That is when state transportation officials are to present their final proposals on what to do with the bridge. The suggestions include replacing it with a wider crossing, rebuilding and expanding it or restoring it while keeping it at its present size and turning over the operation and maintenance of the structure to the town.

Most Westporters have fought building a larger crossing, seeking solely a restoration.

The manager of the Department of Transportation Bridge Design Unit, Daniel Coffey, said if the public showed strong support for a takeover, the state would more than likely adopt that plan.

"It's one of the only cases I can think of where a town wanted to take over a state bridge, in order to preserve it," he said.

Residents from the Saugatuck area and other parts of Westport have wanted to save the Bridge Street Bridge over the Saugatuck for its historical character and to prevent construction of a larger bridge. A large bridge, many fear, would usher in more traffic and commercial growth.

The battle began when Federal and state officials determined in 1983 that the structure, built in 1884, had rotting floor beams and the steel decking and that the trusses and girders had also fallen into disrepair.

State officials decided to upgrade the bridge, whose load capacity had already been cut to seven tons, preventing fire trucks, school buses and tractor-trailers from crossing.

Last fall, backed by the report of an engineering consultant, the Department of Transportation proposed three plans - all calling for a new $6 million crossing. State officials said restoring the bridge, which carries 18,000 vehicles a day, would be impractical.

The new bridge was to be three lanes wide - it now has two - and it was to have higher vertical clearance. It would also have no posted weight restrictions.

The specter of increased traffic, particularly heavy truck traffic, sparked outrage in the town.

Werner Liepolt of Saugatuck was determined to stop the new bridge.

"A larger bridge would bring in tractor-trailers and more heavy trucks," he said, "and eventually that truck traffic would bring commercial growth from across the river."

He pointed out that there were shops and restaurants on the western side of the bridge and a residential zone on the eastern side.

"My property on Bridge Street is worth $200,000," he added. "If the area goes commercial, it will probably be worth $400,000.

"In a way maybe I'm being wrong-headed. I should take the money and run. But I like this area a lot. It has become a vital family area, and I don't want it changed."

A neighbor, Kate Horwich, said: "Any wider bridge would irreparably change the character of the area. The bridge has come to be a symbol of Saugatuck.

"A wider bridge would mean that the street leading to it would have to be widened, and there would inevitably be more traffic."

Mrs. Horwich who walks over the bridge on her way daily to the train station, said the old bridge created a "sense of country, a sense of the past - it's very charming."

The bridge, which used to carry trolly cars at the turn of the century, may be one of the last swing bridges in the state, Mr. Coffey said.

The bridge is still opened manually, with three people turning a large wheel. Part of the bridge then opens 90 degrees, allowing boats to pass.

Town officials estimate that the cost of maintaining the bridge and about two miles of road would run $23,000 a year.

Last December, as part of a state review, the Department of Transportation, with help from the Connecticut Historical Commission, found that the bridge had historical significance. Later, Federal officials declared the bridge eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

Even opponents of the state plans concede the bridge has to be reinforced. Presently fire trucks going to the eastern end of Saugatuck have to use longer time-consuming routes to get to their destination because of the weight restrictions on the bridge.

Because the bridge carries Route 136, the town initially had little say over the design of a new bridge. However, last summer, Saugatuck residents and some town officials, including Third Selectman Martha Hauhuth, came up with the offer to have the town take over the bridge and roads leading to it.

The Board of Selectmen voted to propose the takeover in return for a state-financed restoration program. Transportation Commissioner J. William Burns replied that if the town were willing to take over the bridge and connecting roads, rehabilitation was acceptable.

Mr. Coffey said the state was seeking to find out whether the restoration might be acceptable to a sizable segment of the community.

Not every one i Westport has favored rebuilding. Fire and police officials have complained about the narrowness of the bridge and are asking for at least a modest widening.

Their opponents point to the fact that fire trucks and ambulances traveled on the bridge before the weight limit was imposed.

---

Copyright 2016 The New York Times Company | Home | Privacy Policy | Search | Corrections | XML | Help | Contact Us | Back to Top