Star-Ledger, The (Newark, NJ)

U.S. PUSHING STATE TO SPEED BRIDGE REPAIRS

GUY T. BAEHR
Published: September 17, 1990

At the urging of federal highway officials, the state Transportation Department has formed a task force to find ways to reduce delays in its $9 million-a-year federally funded program to repair and replace deteriorating local bridges around the state.

Federal officials said that as of July 31, the department had accumulated a backlog of $39.8 million in unspent federal funds earmarked for the local bridges.

Richard Davino of the Federal Highway Administration's regional office in Trenton said the problem of delays in spending federal funds earmarked for local bridges "is one we've been pointing out to the state more or less strenuously for a couple of years now." The delays were also noted in July by the North Jersey Transportation Coordinating Council, a regional planning agency made up of state officials and county and local officials from the northern part of the state.

Middlesex County Freeholder David Crabiel, chairman of the council, blamed many of the delays on "time-consuming and involved design procedures and reviews necessary to meet federal and state requirements."

Crabiel said the result of the bridge projects "not being advanced in a timely fashion" has been the accumulation of millions of dollars in unspent federal funds despite a massive backlog of bridges needing repairs in the state.

Jack Dunn, director of traffic engineering and local aid for the Transportation Department, who formed the task force four months ago, agreed that local bridge projects have run into delays, but he said the $39.8 million backlog figure may be misleading.

"I don't think it's a real number because we have a large number of projects under design that will go to construction over the next few years," Dunn said. "In fact, it may turn out that we won't have enough money to do all the projects we have under design. We're compiling data on that now."

At the same time, he said, "We are looking for ways to move these projects faster. That's why we formed the task force."

He said the amount of federal funds available for bridges increased dramatically in the early 1980s, but it has taken time to design the projects and find ways to conform to strict requirements imposed by state and federal environmental agencies, historic preservation commissions, the U.S. Coast Guard and other agencies with authority over the projects.

Davino from the Federal Highway Administration said New Jersey has been allocated $599 million in federal funds for bridge repair and replacement over the last decade, of which $77.3 million remained unspent as of July 31.

Under federal law, 65 percent of the funds must be spent on bridges located on roads designated as part of the state's "federal aid system," which is made up of interstate highways, state highways and some heavily traveled county roads and key urban streets.

Another 15 percent must be spent on bridges located on roads that are not part of the "federal aid system," primarily owned by counties and municipalities.

The remaining 20 percent of the funds may be spent on bridges located either on or off the federal aid system.

Davino said Congress' purpose in requiring that a minimum of 15 percent of the funds go to the so-called "off-system" bridges was to make sure that those bridges, which are rarely owned by state transportation departments, are not neglected in favor of the more heavily traveled "on-system" bridges.

He said New Jersey has done a good job of spending federal aid available for its "on-system" bridges. Of a total of $389 million allocated for such bridges, all but $12.4 million, or 3 percent, had been spent by July 31.

"By contrast," Davino said, of the $89.9 million earmarked for the off- system bridges over the years, $39.8 million, or 43 percent, remained unspent as of July 31.

Of the remaining $119.8 million earmarked for either on- or off-system bridges, he said $25.1 million, or 21 percent, remained unspent.

Davino said not all of the $77.3 million in unspent funds are immediately available to the state because of the way Congress and the Federal Highway Administration dole out aid to the states.

While the funds have been earmarked for New Jersey, the state has not been granted authorization to spend the full amount because, in an effort to keep federal spending down, Congress has in recent years been limiting the amount of federal funds a state may spend to less than the amount earmarked for it under federal aid formulas.

While New Jersey has been spending up to its maximum overall "obligation limits" during the past several years, the Transportation Department has chosen to allow the off-system bridges to absorb a disproportionate percentage of the spending limits imposed by Congress, he said.

"That's a policy judgment we leave to the states. They have to set their priorities," he said.

Dunn said one reason the off-system bridge projects may move more slowly through the department's design and permit process is that they are generally smaller than the on-system projects and so take more administrative work per dollar of construction than the larger projects.

Officials in Monmouth County have proposed a remedy for at least part of the problem that they believe will help speed up work on the mostly county- owned bridges.

Michael Barrett, a deputy commissioner at the Transportation Department from 1982 to 1988 who is now director of public works and engineering for Monmouth County, said the proposal calls for turning responsibility for designing and building the projects over to the counties.

As under a similar arrangement created by the department in 1984 involving local road improvement projects, the state would keep the federal funds earmarked for off-system bridges for its own on-system projects but give an equal amount of state funds to the counties to cover the cost of off-system bridge repairs, he said.

Barrett said the "swap" of federal for state funds would free the counties of many administrative and design requirements imposed on federally funded projects and would get the small projects out of the state's sometimes lengthy design and permit process.

"You'd have less people managing the projects and you'd be able to get this money working more quickly," he said. "It shouldn't take seven to 10 years to do a simple bridge project.

"For one thing, you wouldn't spend nine months on the consultant selection process like the DOT does. You'd take two weeks like we do. You also wouldn't need signoffs from the (Federal Highway Administration) and multiple departments at DOT," he said.

As an example of how long the present procedure can take he cited the Allenwood-Lakewood Bridge in Wall Township which has been closed since 1985 and "we expect will take another five years to get through the regulatory process."

Dunn said the Allenwood-Lakewood Bridge "is not necessarily typical, but it shows you what can happen with all the regulations we have now."

He said the Transportation Department, recognizing the problem, is working with the county on a plan to reopen the bridge sooner by building a temporary bridge on top of the existing bridge.

Barrett said the bridge swap idea was suggested by Monmouth County Freeholder Thomas Powers based on the success of the 1984 funding swap for local roads, which has proven to be popular with both state and local officials and is credited with saving time and money in completing local road projects.

Barrett, who helped design the earlier program, said a similar program for local bridges would be somewhat more difficult, "but I don't think any of the administrative issues are insurmountable."

At the same time, such a swap would require the Transportation Department to commit itself to using a fixed amount of its federal bridge funds each year for local "off-system" bridges, a policy that could reduce available federal funding for "on-system" bridges, he said.

"The state would have to make a policy decision on how much it should spend on off-system bridges," he said.

Dunn said the task force expects to consider the Monmouth County proposal, but he cautioned that it should not be considered a panacea. "We're looking at it. There are a lot of things to consider and I'd say we are still in the embryo stage in terms of a decision."

Both he and Davino from the Federal Highway Administration said high-level federal approval and possibly a change in federal law might be needed to make the proposal feasible.

And Dunn said, "No matter who's doing the project, they have to go through extensive reviews concerning environmental impacts, historic preservation and Coast Guard regulations. That won't change."

He said many of the local bridge delays faced by the Transportation Department stem from historic preservation rules enacted over the last decade.

Many of the bridges are more than 60 years old, which means they may be considered historic structures, and federal and state regulations often prevent the DOT from simply tearing down an old bridge and putting up a new one, he said.

Instead, he said, the old bridge must be moved to a new location where it can be preserved or the new bridge must be built next to the old one, something that often adds to the project's cost and complexity.

Building a bridge at a new location requires relocating approach roads, acquiring new rights-of-way and, because most bridges cross waterways, meeting strict environmental regulations concerning wetlands preservation.

As an example, he cited the Doty Road Bridge on Doty Road in Oakland, a one-lane bridge considered historic that will probably have to be kept in place while a new two-lane bridge is built next to it to handle modern traffic.

Another example of the difficulties encountered is the Bear Tavern Bridge, also known as the **Jacobs Creek Bridge**, on Route 579 in Mercer County.

Dunn said the approximately 60-foot steel truss bridge connecting Hopewell and Ewing townships will have to be moved to a nearby county park or golf course for preservation before a modern replacement can be built. "Because of the way the land is there, we can't build alongside because we can't relocate the approach roads," he said.

In some cases, he said, no way can be found to preserve a historic bridge. He said the Transportation Department recently received permission to tear down the Lower Bank Bridge, a movable bridge connecting Burlington and Atlantic counties.

"It couldn't be moved and, because of its condition, it couldn't be fixed or maintained," he said. Instead, it will be replaced at a cost of $12 million, which will include the cost of thoroughly researching and recording the bridge's history and documenting its appearance with photographs from the archives.

Times, The (Trenton, NJ)

Officials hope to bridge the gap over span's fate

KIMBERLY KRUPA Staff Writer
Published: August 10, 2001

TRENTON _ Hopewell Township's beloved historic landmark, the Bear Tavern Road bridge over Jacobs Creek, was characterized in many ways at last night's Mercer County freeholders meeting.

Most of them were not friendly.

"It's a disaster waiting to happen," said Bernard Goldberg of Jacobs Creek Road in Hopewell Township. "It gets worse and worse every day."

"(Deck) boards are coming up," said David Stem, county engineer. "It's so bad that we're looking in our budget right now to find money to repair it by Monday."

Nobody disputes the period architecture of the wooden-deck bridge, which was built 119 years ago for horse and buggy carriages and hasn't been touched much since. But Hopewell Township officials and county engineers disagree over what to do about the shaky, noisy and arguably obsolete 72-foot span, which can barely support a sport utility vehicle.

Hopewell Township Mayor Marylou Ferrara and members of the township Historic Preservation Commission want the bridge reinforced with sturdier materials that will respect its late-1880s design.

County engineers want to move the bridge to a lesser-traveled place and build a bigger span that can hold heavy ambulances, firetrucks and family-size cars.

The Bear Tavern Road bridge can hold only 3 tons, which is about the weight of a small car with several passengers.

Freeholders last night directed both parties to meet within the next month and come up with an agreement on what steps the county should take.

"Keep in mind that restoring this bridge may mean destroying its integrity beyond any historical significance it has," said Stem, who has been battling Hopewell over replacing the bridge since he became county engineer in 1990.

"I love the steel truss," said Stem. "We can deal with it if everybody understands the consequences."

Some of those consequences concerned Freeholder Lucille Walter, who said she would rather have a safe bridge of no particular historic importance than an unstable span in danger of collapse.

County engineers sought aid to repair the bridge in 1973 and again in 1988, when Janssen Pharmaceuticals announced it would quadruple its headquarters on a 240-acre parcel off Maddock and Bear Tavern roads.

As Freeholder Chairman Brian Hughes noted, "the money is there, but we don't know if it can be used to restore a historic structure. I have a feeling it can only be used for a new bridge."

The Bear Tavern Road bridge is on the Department of Transportation's list of eight structurally deficient bridges in Hopewell Township, meaning it needs repairs but is safe enough to stay open.

Half of Hopewell Township's bridges and culverts _ small structures usually constructed for crossing small streams or storm ditches _ were built between 1870 and 1929, but only two were built like the one on Bear Tavern Road, said Stem.

"There aren't many of these around anymore," he said.

King Iron Bridge and Manufacturing Co., one of the largest and most successful bridge companies in United States history, built the Bear Tavern bridge, according to Hopewell Township resolutions honoring the structure.

If the county restored the bridge instead of replacing it, officials would not be able to enforce the 3-ton load limit and the span could lose its place on various lists of historic places, said Stem.

Times, The (Trenton, NJ)

Hopewell planning overhaul for Jacob's Creek bridge

LISA CORYELL Staff Writer
Published: October 17, 2003

CAPTION:
Staff photo by Mark Sherman
A truck approaches Jacob's Creek bridge in Hopewell Township yesterday.

HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP _ The familiar sound of cars clattering across the wooden deck of the Jacob's Creek bridge would be silenced forever under a plan to upgrade the structural integrity of the 120-year-old span.

After more than two decades of debating how to make the bridge stronger while protecting its historic value, Mercer County and Hopewell Township officials may have reached a compromise.

County engineers are working on a proposal to split the bridge in half, widen it and replace the outdated wooden deck with one made of steel and concrete. "We're waiting for a formal plan to increase the load limit while keeping the (expansion) to a nominal width," said Paul Porgorzelski, township engineer. "We'll circulate that plan to our boards and committees and formulate a response."

The county hopes to have a proposal ready in the next few weeks.

"We believe this is the preferred alternative that Hopewell will agree to," said Tom Rubino, county director of communications and policy. "We're hopeful they'll finally be on board with us because this needs to be done."

If a solution is found, it will put to rest a longstanding dispute over how to turn the Bear Tavern Road bridge, designed for horse-and-buggy use, into one that can accommodate modern traffic demands.

For years the county has wanted to replace the old steel truss bridge, one of only two of its kind in the county, with a sturdier model.

They said the old bridge, with its 3-ton limit and 16.7-feet width, is ill- equipped to handle today's sport-utility vehicles and other heavy vehicles.

In 1995, the county proposed moving the bridge, intact, to another township location and replacing it with a modern bridge. But the township balked, saying the bridge's historic value is tied to its location.

Last year the county released an engineer's report deeming the bridge "functionally obsolete" and "structurally deficient" and recommending it be torn down and replaced.

Since then the county has taken steps to improve the structural integrity of the bridge.

"Obviously it still needs to be fixed but it's not in danger of collapsing tomorrow," Rubino said. "But if trucks that exceed the speed limit go over it or there's an accident, the bridge could fail."

"That's everybody's biggest fear, that a heavy vehicle could cause the bridge to collapse," Porgorzelski said. "We have no problem with increasing the weight limit on the bridge but people here are emphatic that they don't want the bridge destroyed."

A solution can't come fast enough said Diane W. Parks, vice president of administration and community affairs for Janssen Pharmaceutica, which is located near the bridge in Hopewell Township.

She said Janssen employees regularly use the bridge en route to work and officials at the pharmaceutical company have raised concerns about its safety for years.

"We'd like a bridge that is capable of passing a structural engineer's safety inspection," Parks said. "If they come up with a solution that makes the bridge safe while preserving its historic value, that's good. But what is most important to us is that the bridge is safe. This has been going on for years. Something has to be done."

Times, The (Trenton, NJ)

Fate of bridge still up in the air

LISA CORYELL Staff Writer
Published: March 17, 2004

HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP _ For some, the sound of wooden boards clattering each time a vehicle crosses the Jacobs Creek Bridge is a quaint reminder of the bridge's historical status.

For others it's a warning that the 120-year-old span is unsafe in the face of today's traffic demands and desperately needs structural improvements.

The dilemma over how to shore up the bridge without compromising its historical integrity has fallen to a newly appointed task force of local, county and state representatives.

Hopewell Mayor Vanessa Sandom hopes the group will be able to put the matter to rest once and for all. "There have been a lot of attempts to resolve this issue over the years," said Sandom. "I think bringing everyone together from different levels of government is the only way to do it."

Over the years the county-owned bridge, built for horse-and-buggy use, has required constant repairs to keep it in working condition.

But many fear that the old steel truss structure, one of only two of its kind in the county, is an accident waiting to happen.

They say the bridge, with its 3-ton limit and 16.7-foot width, is ill-equipped to handle today's sport utility vehicles and other heavy transports.

Last year the county released an engineer's report lending credence to those claims. The report deemed the bridge "functionally obsolete" and "structurally deficient" and recommended it be torn down and replaced.

Executives at nearby Janssen Pharmaceutica have been pushing for bridge improvements for years.

"The weight limit on that bridge is continually violated and I have serious concerns about its safety," said Diane Parks, vice president of community affairs for Janssen. "I've seen school buses going over that bridge and I fear one will be on the bridge when it fails."

But others with more historical concerns have balked at plans to make wholesale changes to the span. They have objected to proposals to move it and replace it with a more modern structure or split it down the middle, widen it and increase its load limit.

Mercer County Executive Brian Hughes said he hopes the issues will be resolved by the new task force. The group will include state and county engineers, Janssen officials and representatives from state and township historical groups.

"This process is unique from all the others in that it will bring together all the players," Hughes said. "Everyone will have an opportunity to express themselves."

He added that safety is the county's top priority.

"As county executive, I can't sit back and wait for an accident to happen," he said. "The money is in place, we need to make a decision and do something."

Times, The (Trenton, NJ)

Historic bridge's future debated

LISA CORYELL Staff Writer
Published: April 20, 2004

Panel takes on Jacobs Creek span

HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP _ Ninety days. That's how long a group of state, county and local representatives have been given to figure out a way to improve the safety of the Jacobs Creek Bridge without destroying its historical value.

A daunting task, considering the issue has been debated for more than a decade. But the newly formed Jacobs Creek Bridge Task Force got off to a good start last night.

Under the guidance of a state mediator, the seven members of the panel began their three-month quest by revealing their biggest concerns for 120-year-old span. Some, like Greg Sandusky, Mercer County's acting engineer, and Janssen Pharmaceutica representative John Subacus, said safety is paramount. Make it stronger, wider, and safer for today's big vehicles, they said.

Others, like Craig Rolwood, who is on the township's traffic management commission, and Heidi Kahme of the local historical commission, wanted to make sure that no matter what is done, the bridge's historical significance is taken into consideration.

Mayor Vanessa Sandom, who appointed the task force, hopes such dialogue will help break the logjam that has delayed action for years.

"This is the first time everyone has been at the same table," Sandom said after the meeting. "People have been working at this individually or as separate groups. That made it difficult to build a consensus."

Sandom gave the group 90 days to come up with a solution, to be forwarded to Mercer County officials for their consideration.

The county, which owns the bridge, will then be expected to develop an engineering plan that will need state approval because any work at the site will require environmental permits.

The iron truss bridge, built for horse and buggy use, has been in need of a major overhaul for years.

With its 3-ton limit, the span is not strong enough to carry today's heavy sport utility vehicles or pickup trucks. Nor is it wide enough or tall enough for fire and rescue vehicles, which must take a circuitous route to local emergencies.

Last year the county released an engineer's report that listed the bridge as "functionally obsolete" and "structurally deficient" and recommended it be replaced. But attempts over the years to replace the bridge have been fought by those who want the old steel structure _ the oldest in the county _ to remain intact.

Last night Sandom told the task force to forget all the solutions considered in the past and start looking at the problem anew. "Everything is open. There are no set alternatives to choose from," she said. "Your job is to determine what makes sense after evaluating all the data. I'm hoping that as a team, we're a lot smarter than working as individual groups."

Last night task force members agreed to share the information each group has gathered. The task force will discuss the information at its next meeting, May 10.

The mediator, Ray Falls, said members will have to make cases for their own particular points of view. "Everybody was nice and sweet tonight but you really have to go at it over what you want out of this," Falls said.

Barbara Wahlers, one of two residents who attended the meeting, said preserving the bridge is crucial. "This bridge has stood there for 115 years," Wahlers said. "It provides a sense of place, which in our maddening world, is a nice thing to have. With all the technology available today, I think it can be (made stronger) while keeping its integrity intact. I don't want to see some big concrete bridge there. That would be very sad."

Times, The (Trenton, NJ)

Safety first

EDITORIAL
Published: April 22, 2004

The proper priority concerns for Hopewell Township's Jacobs Creek bridge task force are obvious.

They are: Safety. Safety. And safety.

Once that test is met, other considerations, such as historic preservation, can be addressed by Mayor Vanessa Sandom's advisory panel.

Preservationists point out that the 120-year-old bridge with the wooden deck is one of only two steel truss spans of its type in the county. Unlike historic houses and other landmarks, however, this artifact presents a continuing danger to the public that uses it. An engineer's report last year called the bridge "functionally obsolete" and "structurally deficient" and recommended that it be torn down and replaced. It is too low and narrow for fire and rescue vehicles, which take a roundabout route to local emergencies. Its three-ton weight limit precludes its use by SUVs and pickup trucks, but that limit "is continually violated," according to Diane Parks, a vice president at nearby Janssen Pharmaceutica. She says she has seen school buses use the span and fears that one will be halfway across when the collapse comes. Money has been earmarked to replace or overhaul the bridge, and the task force has been asked to hear and consider the differing views on what should be done, including those of history-minded residents who see the span as a nostalgic link to a slower-paced past. If the panel can find a way in its allotted 90 days to reconcile those views with present-day needs, fine. But Mercer County Executive Brian Hughes has it right when he says making the bridge safe is the most important imperative. And it needs to be done before the luck runs out.

Times, The (Trenton, NJ)

Jacobs Creek Bridge at a crossroads

Despite potential problems, some aim to save structure

LISA CORYELL Staff Writer
Published: June 1, 2004

CAPTION:

Staff photo by Frank Jacobs III

Mary Jane Cooper, left, and Ann Merlino sit on the stone wall adjacent to the more than 100-year-old Jacobs Creek Bridge in Hopewell Township. The two, who live near the bridge, and others in the township would like to keep the iron bridge the way it is, but others say the span needs to be replaced.

HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP _ Annie Merlino rarely runs the air conditioner in her bedroom. No matter how hot it gets, she'd rather keep the windows open. That's because Merlino's windows overlook one of her favorite sights _ the old Jacobs Creek Bridge, nestled in a bucolic stretch of woods along a winding waterway off Bear Tavern Road.

A narrow, iron structure with a wood-planked deck, the bridge emits a rumble that sounds like distant thunder every time a vehicle crosses it.

"I just love that bridge," said Merlino, who has lived on Maddock Road for 27 years. "I love to look at it. I love the sound of it. It's soothing and it's wonderful."

And outdated, inconvenient and unsafe, say the bridge's harshest critics.

They complain that the 120-year-old span, built for horse and buggy use, is too small for today's larger sport utility vehicles. SUVs and larger cars must cross one at a time, creating traffic backups during the morning and evening rush hours. Further, critics say, the bridge's 3-ton limit prohibits school buses and most emergency vehicles from crossing.

"Our concerns are for the safety of our employees," said Bill Foster, a spokesman for Janssen Pharmaceutica, whose campus is located less than a half- mile from the bridge. "We believe the bridge needs to be made safer for modern day traffic demands."

While reports over the years have deemed the structure functionally obsolete and at risk of collapse because of its age and design, officials of Mercer County, which owns the bridge, say annual inspections show no signs of critical deterioration. They say despite its age, it is not in immediate danger of falling down.

But they acknowledge that virtually every engineer who has studied the bridge recommends it be replaced with a more modern structure able to handle more cars.

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The trouble is, numerous Hopewell Township officials, along with residents and local history buffs are fighting to keep the bridge just the way it is.

Like Merlino, they have strong emotional ties to the little iron bridge. Not only is it one of two remaining bridges of its kind in Mercer County, but many find it a charming throwback to simpler times.

"It has a certain antique value in its appearance," said Mary Jane Cooper, whose Maddock Road property is adjacent to the bridge. "It's in a beautiful little section of the creek. Driving over it adds a little something to everybody's day."

Well, not everyone's day.

Titusville resident Donna Arons used to drive her 5-year-old twins across the "clackety bridge" because the sound and sight of it amused them. But she said she's stopped out of concern for their safety.

"From what I've read in the papers and what I've been told by the people at Janssen (Pharmaceutica). I'm worried that it's not safe," she said. "I drive a mini-van, and I don't want to be the one to have a problem on it."

The county has formed a group to address the bridge issue in a way that satisfies all concerned.

Comprised of local history buffs, township residents, local police, Janssen representatives and local, county and state officials, the group has been given until July to recommend a solution.

It won't be easy, given the strong feelings on both sides.

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Among the bridge's harshest critics are the officials at Janssen Pharmaceutica, whose employees use the bridge as a link between Interstate 95 and their offices.

The company has applied for township permission to expand its operations. As part of the approval process, Janssen must be able to prove the expansion will not negatively affect local traffic _ a tough sell, given the current bridge situation.

In pressuring the county to replace the bridge, Janssen has historically cited two documents, one a report done by the state and the other a report done by the county. The first is a state analysis done in 1995 that declared the iron- truss span structurally deficient and at risk of collapse.

That report, commissioned by the state Department of Transportation said the bridge was in need of major repair and recommended it be replaced.

According to the report, the bridge has a 3-ton weight limit but, "(v)iolators continually use the crossing despite the weight limit as evidenced during several field visits."

"The truss is considered 'fracture critical,'. . . meaning the failure of any one main component of the truss could result in the collapse of the entire structure," the report said, adding that the iron components of the 120-year old span can become brittle and unyielding, causing further fracture.

In 2001, a bridge re-evaluation survey commissioned by the county deemed the bridge "functionally obsolete" and "structurally deficient due to the serious and poor conditions of the superstructure and substructure, respectively."

That report recommended the old bridge be demolished and replaced with a new structure, a project that was estimated to cost $1.8 million at the time the report was released.

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Despite the critical findings, Mercer County officials vehemently deny the bridge is in danger of collapsing.

"We don't believe it will collapse, even if a vehicle over the 3 tons goes over it," said Aaron Watson, county director of transportation and infrastructure. "We think the bridge is in pretty good shape."

Watson said the county inspects the bridge at least once a year, and it has shown no signs of structural deterioration.

"But at the end of the day, something needs to be done about the bridge. The question is, what?" said Watson.

Fans of the little iron bridge say they want it to stay put.

Spruce it up, shore it up, but don't tear it down, they say.

"I'm sure they can find a way to make it safer and still preserve the bridge's rural character," said Cooper.

Jacobs Creek Road resident Lisa Banket, 41, agrees. Banket remembers lying in bed at night as a child, listening to the rumble of the bridge.

"Safety has to be first and foremost. The last thing you want is for a car to be on that bridge and it go down," Banket said. "But my heart would like for them to keep the design as it is. It's a beautiful bridge."

Besides its beauty, the bridge's narrow deck and 3-ton limit force big trucks to find alternative routes across the creek, Cooper said.

"If they change that bridge, the tractor-trailers will be coming up Bear Tavern Road and ruin the rural feel of the area," Cooper said.

Officials have said it would be illegal to use the bridge as a "pinch point" to control traffic. Further, officials have said, even if the bridge is rated for more weight, the township would still have the option of keeping a lower weight limit on it while allowing emergency vehicles to use it.

Some residents are not swayed by the sentimental arguments to keep the bridge.

"This is the 21st century, and while it's nice to preserve history, it doesn't make sense to do it with a bridge that people need to use," said Paula Plantier, a Jacobs Creek Road resident. "I'm from New York. We like things new, sterile, no character, functional and modern. This clattering, old- fashioned crap is not for me."

Times, The (Trenton, NJ)

Rescue crews to test Jacobs Creek Bridge

LISA CORYELL Staff Writer
Published: June 18, 2004

Rescue crews to test Jacobs Creek Bridge

HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP _ A task force charged with deciding the fate of the historic Jacobs Creek Bridge wants area fire and rescue crews to stage mock emergency runs to determine if the structure impinges on emergency response times.

The results, they say, will help them decide whether to replace the bridge, make it stronger or modify it some other way.

"We want to know if keeping the bridge at its current height, weight and width restrictions will pose a real safety concern with regard to emergency vehicle response time," said Mayor Vanessa Sandom, who sits on the Jacobs Creek Bridge Task Force. "We know how long the alternative routes are, on paper. But until you actually make the run, you don't know which route takes the least amount of time." Because of capacity limits on the narrow iron bridge, emergency response vehicles must take alternate routes to reach the neighborhoods that surround it.

"This is an issue we need to put on the table and resolve," said Paul Porgorzelski, township engineer and task force member. "That will go a long way to determining what we do."

John Holcombe, chief of the Union Fire Company of Titusville, a first response unit to most of the homes near the bridge, said his crew would make the run.

"I don't think it will give us any more information. I think it will just confirm what we suspect, that it would be shorter to cross the bridge rather than take other routes," Holcombe said. "How much shorter? I don't know. But in an emergency every minute counts. The experts say that for every minute you lose, a fire grows exponentially."

The task force has until next month to come up with a recommendation on the bridge's future.

For years the aging span, owned by the county, has been the source of concern.

Studies over the years show that the 120-year-old span, built to carry horse- and-buggy traffic, is too small and weak for today's larger and motorized vehicles.

In a presentation to the task force this week, an engineer who studied the bridge confirmed this.

In a rating system ranging from A to F, the bridge received D's and F's in all categories.

"The D's and F's mean it's time to be concerned," Sandom said. "The A's, B's and C's people can live with. D's and F'smake people nervous."

But Hopewell Township officials, along with residents and local history buffs, are trying to find a way to keep the bridge as it is.

They have strong emotional ties to the little iron bridge. Not only is it one of two remaining bridges of its kind in Mercer County, but many find it a charming throwback to simpler times.

But others, such as officials from nearby Janssen Pharmaceutica, say making it passable to school buses, emergency response vehicles and today's larger cars and trucks is more important.

Many of Janssen's employees use the bridge as a link between Interstate 95 and the company's Bear Tavern Road campus.

Holcombe said he would like to see the bridge replaced with a structure that will allow emergency vehicles to pass.

"It would certainly make our job easier," he said. "It would allow us and our mutual aid to take a more direct route to neighborhoods near the bridge."

Times, The (Trenton, NJ)

Bridge proposal mixes old, new

LISA CORYELL Staff Writer
Published: November 10, 2004

HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP _ It's a proposal sure to raise the hackles of history purists but likely to generate grudging acceptance from more pragmatic motorists.

After four months of studying the structural deficiencies of the Jacobs Creek Bridge, a task force has recommended it be sliced down the middle, widened, heightened and shored up to make it bigger and stronger.

The iron trusses and the wooden decking that give the span its historic charm would remain intact under the proposal.

It's a compromise that many say is an acceptable answer to the long-standing question of what to do with the 120-year-old span, built for horse and buggy traffic. "We would have preferred a much less invasive alternative, but we have to look at safety issues," said Heidi Kahme, a member of the township Historic Preservation Commission who sat on the Task Force. "It would clearly be wider and taller, but it would be in proportion to what it was."

The renovated span would allow school buses and emergency vehicles and fire trucks to cross it. Now, heavy vehicles cannot cross the bridge, which has a 3- ton limit.

Residents got a chance to comment on the proposals during a public hearing Monday night.

"I say build it the strongest you can, but keep it as historic as you can and we'll have the best of both worlds," said Sheila Beyer.

"I think it's cool the committee handled it this way," said resident Bill Piper. "I'm not a purist. I'm aware you have to allow emergency vehicles to cross the creek. You came up with this great possibility of having safety and efficiency and historic preservation going on here."

The proposal is one of 10 alternatives ranging from doing nothing to the current structure to razing it and replacing it with a modern bridge.

The task force's second recommendation is to shore up the bridge to make it strong enough to hold 15-ton vehicles but not wide enough or tall enough for buses and bigger fire trucks.

The last recommendation on the list is to make the bridge a pedestrian walkway and build a modern structure next to it.

Residents living closest to the bridge had mixed reactions to the first recommendation.

Joe Knotts, a Forrest Blend resident, said when he crosses the bridge on his way home at night, its historic charm serves as a mental break from the chaos of the modern day world.

"I would love to maintain that, but if they need to slice it to meet safety issues, it's OK," Knotts said. "But keep it in place and maintain its historical integrity."

But Mary Jane Cooper said the proposal falls short of what she wanted. "I would have preferred they keep it the way it is. I think it's beautiful," she said. "People may say we're opposed to change, but the people who benefit from the change aren't the people who live here."

Officials at Janssen Pharmaceutica, which is located less than a half-mile from the bridge, have spent years lobbying the county to do something about the bridge their employees cross daily.

They insist the bridge is in danger of collapsing.

While reports over the years have deemed the structure functionally obsolete and at risk of collapse because of its age and design, officials of Mercer County, which owns the bridge, say annual inspections show no signs of critical deterioration. They say despite its age, it is not in immediate danger of falling down.

But they acknowledge that virtually every engineer who has studied the bridge has recommended it be replaced with a more modern structure able to handle more cars.

Times, The (Trenton, NJ)

Task force backs bridge repairs

LISA CORYELL Staff Writer
Published: December 17, 2004

HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP _ In a report to Mercer County freeholders this week, members of the Jacobs Creek Bridge Task Force grudgingly supported their own proposal to widen, heighten and shore up the the 120-year-old span built for horse and buggy traffic.

The proposal, which the task force rated No. 1 among several it came up with, is the group's official answer to the bridge's structural and functional deficiencies.

But in presenting their findings to the governing body that will ultimately decide the bridge's fate, members made it clear that the recommendation was not anyone's first choice. History buffs prefer another option that leaves the bridge intact, even though it will continue to be inaccessible to many of today's larger, heavier vehicles.

Those concerned with traffic and commuter issues prefer other options that call for building a bigger and stronger span, even if it means removing the bridge that many residents consider an integral part of their historic landscape.

Freeholders said maybe a compromise is the only way to settle the long- simmering debate.

"After all this time we really still have the same two camps that we had 10 years ago," said Elizabeth Muoio, chairwoman of the board of freeholders. "Maybe it will end up having to be that neither side is totally happy with what we do."

The report, which contains several other recommendations, will be forwarded to the county administration for action.

Muoio said administrators will review the report, conduct their own studies and make a final recommendation to the freeholders.

She said it's time for the county, which has studied the issue for years, to finally act.

"This process has to move forward," Muoio said. "The county wanted input from the township and the community before moving forward. We've gotten as much input as we can. We have to take this and make a decision. We can't afford to continue debating this."

While county engineers say the bridge is not in danger of collapse, they acknowledge that structural deficiencies must be addressed as soon as possible.

The task force was formed in April to help the county decide what path to take. Comprised of local, state and county officials, as well as residents living near the bridge, history buffs and corporate representatives, the group rated the options and recommended the one that scored the highest.

But the group issued its recommendation with caveats.

"There are several (options) we prefer but this is one of them," said John Subucas, a Janssen Pharmaceutica representative who sat on the task force.

Heidi Kahme, a task force member who is also on the township historic preservation committee, said she prefers the No. 2 recommendation, which leaves the bridge intact.

"There's minimal difference between the (first and second plan)," she pointed out.

If the county chooses option No. 1, the bridge would be cut down the middle, widened and heightened and made stronger. It would be strong enough to allow school buses and emergency vehicles to cross it but retain its historical iron trusses and wooden decking.

The task force's second recommendation is to shore up the bridge to make it strong enough to hold 15-ton vehicles but not wide enough or tall enough for buses and bigger fire trucks.

Other alternatives range from doing nothing to the current structure to razing it and replacing it with a modern bridge. The last recommendation on the list is to make the bridge a pedestrian walkway and build a modern structure next to it.

Times, The (Trenton, NJ)

Jacobs Creek bridge to be relocated Historic Hopewell structure will span Woolsey Brook

LISA CORYELL Special To The Times
Published: February 24, 2009

HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP - In its 125-year life, the iron bridge straddling the banks of Jacobs Creek has carried an evolution of vehicles, from the horse-drawn carriage to the 3-ton SUV.

For 125 years the iron bridge that crosses Jacobs Creek has served traffic demands spanning from horse-drawn carriages and steam engine cars to beefed up SUV's with movie screens and computerized navigational systems.

After decades of debate, Mercer County plans to remove the structurally unsound but much-loved bridge and replace it with a more modern one capable of handling heavier traffic.

"It's such a relief to have reached a decision," said Aaron Watson, transportation director for Mercer County. "We aren't going to make everyone happy but at the end of the day, safety has to be our paramount concern."

The old bridge will be relocated to the Alliger tract, a 167-acre swath of preserved land near the township administration building. There the bridge will span Woolsey Brook, once again serving pedestrian and horse traffic.

"It's a sad day for us in Hopewell Township to have to move the bridge," said Mayor Vanessa Sandom. "But this solution protects the historic integrity of the bridge and allows future generations to enjoy it while protecting the motorists in our town."

The decision to relocate the bridge puts to rest more than two decades of heated debate. For years the county has wanted to replace the old steel truss bridge, one of only two of its kind in the county, with a sturdier model. Experts have argued that the aging bridge, with its 3-ton limit and 16.7-feet width, is unsafe and ill- equipped to handle today's heavier traffic demands. Because of their weight, some emergency vehicles and school buses are unable to cross the bridge, they argued.

But reaching a decision on how to shore up the bridge without compromising its historical integrity has proved nearly impossible. And any suggestion of building a new bridge and moving the old one to another location has brought howls of protest from history buffs and other township residents who argued that the Jacobs Creek location is an integral part of the bridge's historical significance.

Yesterday, Elizabeth Ackerman, a member of the Hopewell Township Historic Preservation Commission, reluctantly endorsed the county's decision to move the bridge.

"A historical structure saved in its original location is always the ideal," Ackerman said. "But if time and change require it to be replaced; the second best choice is that it gets saved in its original condition in a new location in Hopewell Township. At least it's not lost altogether."

The county is seeking input from Hopewell Township as to the design of the replacement bridge.

County officials had proposed a truss bridge similar to the original. But members of the Historic Commission balked at that idea.

"We're not interested in a reproduction of an old-fashioned bridge," Ackerman said. "You can't recreate history. We'd like to see a simple structure that over time would disappear into the setting. We want to keep it very minimalist, very soft, very unobtrusive to the environment."

In endorsing the replacement plan, the county rejected an earlier proposal endorsed by a task force comprised of local, state and county officials, as well as residents living near the bridge, history buffs and corporate representatives.

In late 2004, the Jacobs Creek Bridge Task Force grudgingly came up with a proposal to make the bridge safer by splitting it down the middle, widening it, raising its overhead trusses and shoring up its wooden decking.

That suggestion, along with about nine others, were forwarded to Mercer County Executive Brian Hughes for consideration. Over the past four years, the county has painstakingly reviewed each of the options.

"We looked at the cost of each proposal, the impact it would have on the bridge and the surrounding area, what the lifespan of each option would be," Watson said.

In the end, the county rejected the recommendation of the task force.

"The option they endorsed was slice and dice," Watson said. "They wanted to cut the bridge open and widen it. Once you do that you destroy the historical integrity of the bridge."

Watson said the county will wait to hear from Hopewell Township on suggestion for a replacement bridge before sending the bridge replacement plan to the State Historic Preservation Office for approval.

He said having the township endorsement on the plan is tantamount to getting the state to approve it.

Photo Credit: 1. MARTIN GRIFF/THE TIMES

1. Mercer County will replace the old iron bridge at Jacobs Creek Road and Bear Tavern Road in Hopewell.

Times, The (Trenton, NJ)

New Jacobs Creek Bridge coming Hopewell Twp. settles on replacement for historic span

LISA CORYELL Special To The Times
Published: April 15, 2009

HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP - After decades of debate, heavy-hearted local officials have reluctantly endorsed a plan to replace the historic Jacobs Creek Bridge with a more modern iron truss bridge, like the one on Province Line Road.

The design, which bears little resemblance to the existing iron truss bridge that has straddled the banks of Jacobs Creek for 125 years, will blend with the scenic character of the area without trying to replicate its historic predecessor, officials said.

"I hate to see a part of history disappear but we're responsible for the safety of our citizens and the motoring public," said Mayor Vanessa Sandom. "That trumps all other concerns."

The State Historic Preservation Office will have the final say on the replacement bridge.

"Once they approve the concept, we can move ahead with the project," said Julie Willmot, a spokeswoman for the county, which owns the bridge. A decision is expected next month.

The endorsement of a replacement design caps decades of debate over whether to remove the structurally unsound but much-loved bridge built for horse and buggy traffic.

County officials have argued that the old iron truss bridge, one of only two of its kind in the county, is ill-equipped to meet the demands of today's traffic. The old bridge, with its 3-ton limit and 16.7-feet width, prohibited the crossing of some emergency vehicles and school buses, they argued.

But history buffs and legions of township residents fought to keep the bridge, whose overhead iron trusses and noisy wooden deck added to its charm.

In February the county announced it would relocate the old bridge to a park near the township municipal building where it will serve as a footbridge over Woolsey Brook.

The county proposed replacing it with another type of iron truss bridge, but agreed to wait for input from the township before submitting a design for state approval.

At first, members of the Hopewell Township Historic Preservation Commission balked at the idea of installing another iron truss bridge, arguing that a reproduction would confuse people.

But after considering alternatives, the commission has agreed that a truss bridge would be acceptable, said Paul Pogorzelski, township engineer.

"People generally preferred the truss bridge over different variations of concrete structures," he said.

Sandom agreed.

"It's sufficiently different from the original but it fits within the context of the area," she said.

In moving forward with a replacement plan, the county rejected an earlier proposal endorsed by a task force comprised of local, state and county officials, as well as residents living near the bridge, history buffs and corporate representatives.

In late 2004, the Jacobs Creek Bridge Task Force grudgingly came up with a proposal to make the bridge safer by splitting it down the middle, widening it, raising its overhead trusses and shoring up its wooden decking.

That suggestion, along with about nine others, was forwarded to Mercer County Executive Brian Hughes for consideration. Over the past four years, the county has painstakingly reviewed each of the options.

In the end, the county rejected the recommendation of the task force, calling it a "slice and dice" plan that would destroy the historical integrity of the bridge.

Times, The (Trenton, NJ)

Hopewell Twp. bridge plan stokes safety fears

LISA CORYELL SPECIAL TO THE TIMES
Published: June 24, 2009

HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP - For a certain group of township residents, Mercer County's decision to replace the 125-year-old Jacobs Creek Bridge with a bigger, stronger structure is more than just an affront to history, it is an assault on their safety.

They say the quaint iron truss bridge, by virtue of its size and weakened state, has served as a traffic-calming device that has slowed traffic and kept Bear Tavern Road from becoming a truck route.

Now, after decades of discussion and debate, the county is moving ahead with plans to replace it.

"Removing that bridge would basically open up that area to a lot of traffic and a lot of trucks," said Robin Fogel, who lives on Forrest Edge Drive. "We're seriously concerned about this."

Fogel is spearheading a group that will voice its objections tonight when county officials present the township committee with conceptual designs for a replacement bridge.

"This is about safety," Fogel said. "Every third person living around here has had an accident. That's with the old bridge. Can you imagine what will happen when you have one that's open to all traffic? It's really kind of scary."

Mercer County Executive Brian M. Hughes, who said he has fielded numerous e-mails and phone calls on the matter, assured residents that county engineers will be on hand to address their concerns.

"Please understand, this is an extremely involved project that will cost millions of dollars, and the primary goal of all of the agencies involved is to eliminate a hazardous situation," Hughes wrote in a letter to Fogel. "We encourage you to attend the June 24 meeting to learn more about the plan to fix this dangerous bridge.

The meeting will be held at 7 p.m. at the municipal building.

Because the current bridge has been deemed unsound by engineers, heavy vehicles - like big trucks, school buses and some rescue vehicles - are prohibited from crossing it. While the design specifications haven't been finalized on the replacement bridge, county officials have said it will meet federal standards requiring it to accommodate the biggest vehicles on the road.

Residents worry that the intersections north and south of the bridge are treacherous enough without adding heavy-duty vehicles to the mix. And the county's plan to realign Bear Tavern Road north of the bridge will only exacerbate the situation, they said.

The fate of the Jacobs Creek Bridge has been debated for decades, pitting county engineers against the residents and history buffs fighting to save it.

County officials have argued that the old iron truss bridge, one of only two of its kind in the county, is unsafe and ill-equipped to meet the demands of today's traffic.

In February, the county announced it would relocate the old bridge to a park near the township municipal building, where it will serve as a footbridge over Woolsey Brook.

The relocation plan has been approved by the township committee and local and state historic-preservation groups. The county has now moved on to designing plans for the replacement bridge.

Times, The (Trenton, NJ)

Hopewell residents rally against new bridge

ROBERT STERN SPECIAL TO THE TIMES
Published: August 19, 2009

About 60 residents turned out last night to express their concern over and opposition to the county's plan to replace the historic 125-year-old Jacobs Creek Bridge with a more modern structure that would be able to handle heavy truck traffic.

Mercer County officials were not invited to the special community meeting on the project and related roadway-safety improvements along Bear Tavern Road, said Mayor Vanessa Sandom, who hosted the information session.

"The current bridge is the only traffic-calming device that we have and if you take that away, it's going to be a disaster," said John Hansbury, who lives along Bear Tavern Road.

He urged the mayor and township committee to rescind a resolution they approved in March that gave conditional endorsement for the county to go ahead and replace the narrow 3-ton weight-limit iron truss span with a sturdier bridge.

"Right now, you've gotten them off the hook by telling them Hopewell wants it," Hansbury said after drawing applause for his proposal from most of the people attending the meeting.

Mary Jane Cooper, a township resident who lives close to the 15-mph speed limit bridge, objected to a no-weight-limit replacement span on grounds that it will be an open invitation for tractor-trailers and other large trucks. Taking particular heat from residents was Janssen Pharmaceutica, which many see as the lone beneficiary of a new bridge because it will open a new path for trucks making deliveries to its corporate campus off Bear Tavern Road.

"I don't see how (a rig driver) can even take that road once without jackknifing," Cooper said, referring to truck drivers who would be able to use the winding, steep end of Bear Tavern Road if a stronger, wider bridge were built.

"Sooner or later somebody's going to jackknife down that road," she said. "Talk about safety, this is not safer."

Because the current bridge has been deemed unsound by engineers, heavy vehicles -- such as big trucks, school buses and some rescue vehicles -- are forbidden from crossing it. While the design specifications haven't been finalized for a replacement bridge, county officials have said it will meet federal standards requiring it to accommodate the biggest vehicles on the road.

Residents worry that the intersections north and south of the bridge are treacherous enough without adding heavy-duty vehicles to the mix.

The fate of the bridge has been debated since the 1960s, Sandom said.

The controversy has pitted county engineers against residents and history buffs fighting to save it.

County officials have argued that the old iron truss bridge, one of only two of its kind in the county, is unsafe and ill-equipped to meet the demands of today's traffic.

In February, the county announced it would relocate the old bridge to a park near the township municipal building, where it will serve as a footbridge over Woolsey Brook.

In addition to the township committee, local and state historic-preservation groups have approved the relocation plan. The county, however, has yet to decide whether the new $5 million bridge will be a steel truss bridge or a concrete span.

Times, The (Trenton, NJ)

Bridge foes cite political donation

STAFF WRITER, Linda Stein
Thursday, August 27, 2009

HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP -- Residents objecting to the county's plan to replace the Jacob's Creek Bridge allege that elected officials are favoring the interests of a large business over theirs and point to a $10,000 political contribution to county Democrats as evidence.

County officials, however, were quick to deny that there was any connection between the donation and support for the bridge-replacement plan.

The residents, who've turned out at public meetings to oppose plans to replace the historic 125-year-old bridge, are not going to go away, said John Hansbury, who has lived nearby on Bear Tavern Road for 45 years.

"You've got to stand up and fight," said Hansbury. "It's going to destroy this area."

The $5 million proposal calls for the old bridge, which everyone agrees is in need of repairs, to be replaced by a modern span, with the historic wooden-decked truss bridge to be relocated to a park near the township building. In addition, a new bridge would be build at a different spot along the creek, allowing drivers to follow a curve, rather than make the current sharp turn on Bear Tavern Road.

Hansbury and other opponents of the plan say the county should adopt one of the recommendations of the township's 2004 bridge task force which calls for remodeling the current bridge to make it safe for heavier vehicles without moving it. Those alternatives would cost the county either $900,000 or $1.6 million, according to task force documents.

Hansbury notes that Bear Tavern Road, with a 50 mph speed limit, serves as a cut-through for drivers who want to beat traffic on Routes 31 and 29 and head to I-95. The present bridge acts as a calming device, requiring drivers to slow down and keeping large trucks from the neighborhood, he said.

Last week Hansbury was among the 60 residents who showed up at a township committee meeting where they asked officials to rescind a March resolution giving a conditional endorsement for the county to replace the bridge.

Now, the residents who oppose the bridge relocation believe that Janssen Pharmaceuticals will be the primary benefactor of the new bridge which will ease truck traffic to its campus located nearby on Bear Tavern Road.

They also note that Johnson & Johnson, the parent of Janssen, made a $10,000 contribution to the Mercer County Democratic Committee in November 2003, just days after Brian M. Hughes was elected county executive. A few days later $10,000 was transferred by the committee to Hughes for County Executive, records show.

Johnson & Johnson is mentioned by name in Hughes' December 2003 transition report regarding maintaining the county engineering staff.

While Johnson & Johnson's largess is given to candidates in both parties, the company makes most of its contributions at the state level, according to the state Election Law Enforcement Commission. However, in the 2003 election cycle, J&J also gave $5,200 to the Republican Committee in Burlington County and $4,000 to the Republicans in Somerset County.

J&J has a political action committee that makes contributions to local, state and federal elected officials and political parties in full compliance with all applicable campaign financing laws, according to spokesman Srikant Ramaswami. He noted that Janssen got involved in discussing the fate of the bridge at the invitation of Hopewell Township Mayor Vanessa Sandom and took part in a 2004 task force that studied the situation and made recommendations about the bridge.

"As you know, the bridge is historic but in poor condition and in need of substantial rehabilitation," Ramaswami said. "Its use by emergency vehicles is significantly limited.

"The challenge for the greater community -- Mercer County, Hopewell Township, State Historic Preservation Office, residential and corporate neighbors has been to address the functional and structural obsolescence of the bridge while respecting its historical significance," Ramaswami continued. "For many years Janssen has been actively engaged with the community and their efforts aimed at identifying the alternatives and recommending a course of action for addressing the bridge's deteriorated condition. We believe the analysis conducted by the Jacobs Creek Task Force has provided the platform for a permanent solution. This decision has been made by Mercer County as they own the bridge."

Hansbury, former county Republican chairman, said his interest in the bridge is "personal not political."

Sandom was "unaware" of J&J's contribution to the Democratic Committee, but noted that it has been several years since it was given and that township officials had been discussing repairing or replacing the bridge since "way before" Janssen moved to Bear Tavern Road in 1990.

"If it had an impact on Mr. Hughes it was a very delayed impact," Sandom said. "The discussion goes back decades," she said, including proposals under the two previous county executives. "In 2001 there was correspondence between Janssen and the county administrator about moving the bridge," she said.

In June 1988, before Janssen moved to its Bear Tavern Road campus, the township passed a resolution to relocate Jacobs Creek Bridge, she said.

A similar resolution was passed in 1999.

Also in 1988, the county appropriated $55,000 to relocate the historic bridge. At that time, Hansbury signed a petition urging the county to keep the bridge in the township. Various state, county and township officials continued to discuss removing the bridge over the years, Sandom said.

Hansbury does not remember signing a petition in 1988 but said, "Twenty-one years ago everything was different. I can't tell you what a difference traffic has been in 21 years. If that's my signature, I'll admit I made a mistake."

Hughes, meanwhile, indignantly denied any connection between the bridge removal and the J&J contribution, which he notes went to the county party not to his campaign. He called any link "patently ridiculous."

In 1966 when the county acquired the right-of-way on the downstream side of the bridge to realign Bear Tavern Road, Hughes was 10 years old and his father was the governor, he said.

"It's laughable that we would be fixing a bridge for any other reason than the safety of the people in Hopewell Township and safety of the rest of the county," Hughes said. "I'd had to have been something special to do pay-to-play from 1966. It's laughable that I'm doing pay-to-play with Johnson & Johnson. No one is allowed to give more than $400 that has a county contract. You've got some angry neighbors. They're looking for any reason to stop this bridge (move).

"It's just ridiculous," Hughes continued. "It's coming from the former Republican chair. He's putting some political spin on it."

Asked why J&J would give the Mercer Democrats such a large contribution just after his election, Hughes said, "I think that's the way politics was before pay-to-play reform. That's not the way politics is now."

Meanwhile three levels of government -- the township, the county and the state Historic Preservation Office -- are onboard with the plan to replace the bridge, Sandom noted. The township has also requested that the county use other methods to slow traffic down along Bear Tavern Road, Sandom said.

However, the state Department of Environmental Protection has yet to issue a permit for disturbance of a fresh water wetland, which is needed before the project can proceed.

Times, The (Trenton, NJ)

Hopewell Residents Still Hoping To Save Historic Span

Linda Stein SPECIAL TO THE TIMES
Thursday, August 29, 2009

HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP - Controversy continues to swirl around plans to move and replace the historic Jacob's Creek Bridge on Bear Tavern Road. Earlier this year the county decided to move the bridge and build a new one, after discussions about problems with the old, wooden-deck truss bridge dating back from the 1960's.

However, residents who live in the bucolic area fear a new bridge will pose a safety problem by increasing traffic, especially truck traffic, on Bear Tavern Road, which serves as a shortcut from Route 31 to Route 29 and I-95. They also question why the county did not adopt recommendations from the township's 2004 Bridge Task Force to reinforce and rehabilitate the existing bridge and instead approved a plan outlined by an engineering consultant that would relocate the old bridge to a park and install a new bridge that will meet federal standards and accommodate large trucks.

The residents also contend that a nearby company, Janssen Pharmaceuticals, will be the beneficiary of the new bridge, which would support large trucks heading to its campus. About 60 residents rallied to oppose the bridge plan at a committee meeting on Aug. 18.

They also question why only five pages of a 93-page Historic Bridge Alternative Analysis by Keller and Kirpatick have been released to the public. An Open Public Records Act request by resident John Hansbury was denied by the county counsel's office, which cites a state law and executive order adopted after the 9/11 terrorist attacks to keep "bridge survey reports, and any structural plans, descriptions of specific structural deficiencies or design calculation for any transportation structure, facility of building" confidential.

" I'm complying with the executive order and the memo from the DOT Department of Transportation," said Deputy County Counsel Sarah Crowley. "I don't make the laws, I'm just counsel for the county and I try to follow them and that's the way I read it."

Pete Daly, a spokesman for the county, said the county is "complying with existing laws" regarding release of the report. He declined further comment.

Dan Martin, a Maddock Road resident and lawyer, noted that a 2008 engineering proposal for the much larger and more prominent Goethals Bridge, which connect Elizabeth with Staten Island, is available on the Internet. "What could the terrorists learn from that report?" Martin asked about the Mercer County report. "Instead of holding back so much information from the public, a small part could be redacted and the remainder released, he suggested. The document might explain why county officials chose to replace the bridge rather than deciding on other options, he said. For example, the county could move the old bridge to preserve its historic significance and replace it with a smaller, cheaper bridge that would still bar heavy trucks", he said. "We don't know why," Martin said. "If there are good reasons why, let them release the report."

"In view of sunshine laws, whatever information there is should be available to the public," said Margaret Kramer, another resident who lives near the bridge.

"I find it hard to believe that a 100-year-plus bridge should fall under national security. You're talking about Jacobs Creek that you can wade across. I know that laws are important, but sometimes use common sense. It wouldn't hurt to use that. I can't believe not to release the report is the intent of the law."

Kathleen Mooney, a Ewing resident who lives near the bridge and uses it nearly every day, said the consultant's report should be made public. "I don't feel that's a good excuse," Mooney said. "In good faith, they should certainly release it to the people who live here."

"I realize that something has to be improved upon," Mooney said about the bridge. "But I'm not so sure that what the county wants to do is the best thing for everybody. I feel that plans were made without talking to the people who live in the area. There are other options they should explore. They are not weighing them."

"If they want to design a bridge the way the county wants to do it, it's going to cause problems long range. These roads are not designed to carry heavy traffic. It's going to tear them up. I don't think the powers that be have considered all the options."

Another Hopewell resident who lives near the Jacob's Creek Bridge, Mary Alicia Devine, said she is concerned about traffic and how the process of developing plans for the bridge has been handled without “the luxury of input from the local residents." Increased truck traffic will have "greater impact" on the entire area, not just the homes along Maddock and Bear Tavern roads. She fears the new bridge will provide a "Thru-way" for trucks.

“There’s been a steamroller affect to local residents,” she said. “I think it’s unfair. It doesn’t allow for due diligence. Meanwhile, county officials say discussions regarding the bridge problem date to the 1960s when the county bought the land to realign the road. Mercer County Executive Brian Hughes has insisted that the plans for the bridge are to ensure safety of all county residents and also take historic preservation need into account

In an August 18 letter to Hopewell Township Mayor Vanessa Sandom, Hughes said: “The need to address the current condition of the Jacob’s Creek Bridge is of immanent concern. The existing structure is currently posted at three ton, which precludes use by emergency vehicles, school busies and most delivery and service vehicles. Due to the extent and nature of repairs necessary to bring the structure into compliance with current engineering design standards, as well as addressing historic preservation requirements, rehabilitation of the existing structure is not feasible as noted in the Historic Bridge Alternatives Analysis.”

The township committee gave conditional approval to the plan in March and has asked the county for other traffic calming remedies for Bear Tavern Road. The State Historic Preservation Office has also signed off on the plan which will preserve the old bridge in a park near the township building.

Times, The (Trenton, NJ)

Foe of new Hopewell span seeks engineering data

Linda Stein SPECIAL TO THE TIMES
Wednesday, September 02, 2009

HOPEWELL TOWNSHIP -- A Bear Tavern Road resident, who lost an Open Public Records Act request to see a copy of an engineering report about a local bridge that is about to be replaced, sent the county solicitor a strong letter saying that he will appeal.

John Hansbury is one of several area residents trying to stop Mercer County's plans to move the historic Jacob's Creek Bridge to a park and replace it with a modern span. The residents object to the plan because they believe it will increase truck traffic in the area, creating safety problems.

Residents say the present 125-year-old bridge, which can only handle 3 tons, acts as a traffic-calming device, causing vehicles to slow down. Although the bridge belongs to the county, a 2004 township task force, which studied the issues surrounding it, had recommended either strengthening and widening the bridge or rehabilitating it.

County officials counter that safety is the reason they want to replace the aging span; however, a 93-page report from county engineering consultants that is the basis for that decision has not been released to the public, except for a five-page summary. Hansbury is seeking the whole report.

In denying Hansbury's OPRA request for the engineering report, Deputy County Counsel Sarah Crowley cited a state law and executive order adopted after the 9/11 terrorism attacks. Crowley said she responded to Hansbury's letter, citing the order and a memorandum from the state Department of Transportation that tell her to keep the information confidential for "national and local security reasons."

"I'm shocked Mr. Hansbury would want to compromise the security of Mercer County residents," Crowley said. "The rationale behind the executive order and DOT memorandum was security. I am not going to second-guess an executive order from the governor, nor a memorandum from DOT that tells me not to disclose this information."

In his letter to County Counsel Arthur Sypek, Hansbury said any sensitive aspects could be redacted from the report but "the specifics of the structural deficiencies are well known, not disputed and not relevant to the issue, which is what the basis was for the county rejecting the less costly and safer alternatives or rehabbing the existing bridge or building a smaller alternative."

Hansbury said if the county does not respond to his letter in seven days he will file an appeal with the state Government Records Council.

Hansbury noted that he can get a 2008 report documenting the engineering of the much larger Goethals Bridge that connects New Jersey to New York but not the bridge over "a little creek."

"They're afraid somebody is going to blow up the Jacob's Creek Bridge?" he asked. "Why they're putting up a fight on that is all the more reason we want to see it," Hansbury said. "More and more people are learning what's happened here and are getting more furious. This is not going to go away."

Hopewell Mayor Vanessa Sandom said the township officials have seen only the five-page summary and that reading the entire engineering report would leave the township open to legal liability. Meanwhile, two state bridges in Hopewell are undergoing repairs and the township has not seen detailed engineering studies for those bridges, she said.

"The township doesn't routinely and has never to my knowledge asked for structural calculations and designs of bridges and roads," Sandom said. "That doesn't fall under our jurisdiction. We don't put ourselves in the position to second-guess the county or state," she said. "We just don't do it."

The township committee gave conditional approval to the county plan in March.

Meanwhile, Hansbury went to Califon in Hunterdon County to look at the Main Street Bridge, which was a similar truss bridge to the Jacob's Creek Bridge. In that case, the town fought the County and that 1887 span, which crosses the south branch of the Raritan River, was renovated and widened in 1987.

"They kept the bridge," Hansbury said. "They put beams under it, strengthened it and widened it by 8 feet. It's a beautiful bridge. It's something they could do here. That was one of the options the (township) task force came up with, to rehab and widen the bridge, which would cost $1.6 million. But the county wants to put a concrete highway bridge in there for $5 million. They could do the same thing here and keep the area safe and keep the big trucks off it."

Despite the alterations, the Califon Bridge has been recommended as historic by the state Historic Bridge Survey.

The Hopewell Township Historic Preservation Commission will meet Sept. 9 at 7:30 p.m. in the township municipal building to discuss whether to recommend that the county replace the old Jacob's Creek Bridge with a new truss bridge or a concrete span.