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Bicyclists wage bridge battle

Bridge

Car ban sought before Santa Cruz council

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Eighty-five bicyclists rode from the West Cliff Drive Bridge to Civic Auditorium on Tuesday night to urge the Santa Cruz City Council to keep automobiles off the historic bridge.

The bicyclists, many still wearing their helmets and munching

on pita bread, expressed disappointment that none of three options up for consideration Tuesday excluded cars from the bridge.

The council was to consider whether to repair or replace the 77-year-old structure, believed to be the last of its kind in the state. By late Tuesday night, the council had not made a decision.

"With cars on the bridge, you just lose it for bikes. You lose the safety," said Josh Muir, 20, of Santa Cruz.

But other residents who live near the Beach Street and Washington Street intersection, where traffic has been forced since the bridge was closed to ve-

hicles three years ago, urged the council to follow the recommendation of city staff members and replace the bridge with a two-way structure.

"It's true it's historical, but to face reality, they should have two-way car traffic on that bridge," said Geraldine Shelley. "I walk in the area every day and the present situation at Beach and Washington streets is truly horrendous and very dangerous."

Using an 1840 design patented by William Howe, Southern Pacific Railroad built the 62-foot span in 1918 over its tracks near Washington and Beach streets. The company still owns it.

Over the years, the bridge has become a cherished shortcut among local motorists around the congested Beach Street and wharf area to West Cliff Drive.

Concerns about the bridge's de-

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Historic bridge is subject of Santa Cruz tug-of-war

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teriorating condition in the 1980s led the California Department of Transportation to seek funds to replace it. With more urgent downtown repairs taking precedence after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, the bridge project was put on the back burner until 1992, when Caltrans closed the bridge after finding extensive moisture and termite damage.

Meanwhile, interest in preserving the structure arose when it became known as the only example of Howe Truss architecture still in use in the state. The bridge

was included in the 1989 Santa Cruz Historic Building Survey and in Caltrans' own "Historic Highway Bridges of California," published the following year. It is now a candidate for the National Register of Historic Places.

The bridge is the subject of a tug-of-war between preservationists, bicyclists and pedestrians who want to keep it as is and motorists and city staffers who want it replaced.

The city Public Works Commission and a committee appointed by the council in 1991 to study the bridge repair have recommended shoring it up for bicycles and one-way auto use.

But bicyclists and motorists disapprove. Bicyclists want cars off the bridge, saying it's too narrow to share. Drivers, meanwhile, have urged the city to follow the recommendation of its public works staff and replace the bridge with a concrete structure that can accommodate two-way auto traffic as well as bikes.

Restoring the bridge would cost \$845,000, most of which would be paid for by Federal Bridge Rehabilitation and Replacement funds, according to city reports. The city's share would be 10 percent, or \$84,500. A new two-way bridge would cost \$1.8 million, with the city paying \$180,000.