

A bridge for the 21st century

Historic Westside span will be restored for cars, bikes, pedestrians



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Work on landmark wooden truss to start in fall

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SANTA CRUZ — San Francisco has its Golden Gate. Santa Cruz will soon have its, well, you might call it the "Bridge of Accommodation."

Bikers, automobiles and pedestrians finally will have access to West Cliff Drive bridge, scheduled to be rebuilt starting this fall after being closed for eight years.

But here's the thing: they each only get one lane.

In an attempt to bridge polarized viewpoints, the Santa Cruz City Council in 1995 rejected bikes-only or

cars-only options in favor of allowing everyone a little bit of the historic bridge.

They also managed to satisfy engineers who said a stronger bridge was needed and preservationists who wanted to save historic trusses.

The result is that when the bridge opens next summer the old trusses will be incorporated in the new bridge, and the new lumber used in rebuilding will be stained to make it look old.

"It's going to look just like it does now, but most of it will be new," said Doug Sereda, project manager of Anderson Pacific Engineering Construc-

tion, the firm awarded the city contract earlier this month.

A vintage Howard truss bridge built in 1918, the bridge connects the beach area with West Cliff Drive over the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks.

It is listed in the "Historic Highway Bridges of California" as the only truss of its kind in the state.

Until 1992, the two-lane bridge was used by about 9,000 cars a day. It was a favorite shortcut to and from downtown of Westside residents.

The bridge was closed when engineers determined it was unsafe for automobile traffic. It was later re-

Reconstruction on the historic West Cliff Drive bridge is scheduled to begin in November.

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opened to bikes and pedestrians.

Debate over the bridge started when city engineers recommended replacing the bridge with a concrete bridge that would accommodate two lanes of automobile traffic, two-way bike travel and pedestrians.

Mayor Katherine Beiers came unglued. She and other preservationists wanted the old bridge saved, or at least its features incorporated into a new bridge.

"We'd already lost so many historic structures (in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake), and this one was so important," Beiers said.

The fight soon polarized between those who wanted it for two-lane automobile use and bicyclists and pedestrians who had grown to love the car-less status.

At 40 feet wide, the bridge was too simply too narrow to handle two lanes of traffic for bikes and cars.

Another wrinkle: Caltrans financing would be available only if cars were allowed on the span.

The fight over the bridge was accompanied by petition drives and bike ride-ins to City Council meetings.

Then council members split the bridge, allowing a small victory for everybody.

The bridge will have a southbound lane for automobiles. There will be an eight-foot wide lane for bikes. On the other side, there will be a separate walkway for pedestrians, said Sereda.