

Historic covered bridge may be razed

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Liability risks could doom span in Santa Cruz

BY PAUL ROGERS
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The DeLaveaga Covered Bridge, which welcomed pioneer families to Santa Cruz 100 years ago but has since fallen into disrepair, should be demolished and replaced, city parks officials are recommending.

The 83-foot bridge spans Branciforte Creek at the west entrance to DeLaveaga Park.

Once a sturdy redwood landmark, the bridge today sags with age, fenced off even to pedestrians. Its decaying, moss-covered timbers seem to show the strain from every horse wagon and Model T Ford that passed over after its construction in 1892.

Although the span is believed to be one of only 10 historic covered bridges remaining in California, liability concerns are troubling the city.

"If there's heavy rain this winter, my worry is that the bridge is going to be knocked down," said Jim Lang, city parks director. "It's dangerous."

In September, the Santa Cruz Parks and Recreation Commission recommended the bridge be dismantled. Lang and local architect Mark Primack concluded that

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The sagging DeLaveaga Covered Bridge poses serious liability risks and should be torn down, Santa Cruz city parks officials say.

Wrecking ball perils DeLaveaga bridge

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support timbers are so badly rotted that they cannot be repaired. Instead, Primack has drawn plans to build a replica of the bridge using new timbers and the original metal brackets.

It could be years before a new bridge goes up, however.

Costs for the replacement project are estimated as high as \$200,000, Primack said. No city funds are available. State and federal agencies have turned down at least a half-dozen applications for grant money over the past decade because the bridge is not at its original location.

Many Santa Cruz preservationists still are shellshocked from the loss of historic downtown buildings in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. They are hardly rushing to embrace the replacement project, which so far has attracted little attention.

"We tend to be losing touch with some of the important things in our past," said Ross Gibson, a Santa Cruz historian and author. "I hope some alternative can be found."

Covered bridges were common during the 19th century. Their roofing slowed rotting by preventing rain from forming pools on wooden floorboards.

Enclosed sides also blocked the view of water below, which kept horses from becoming frightened and rearing up.

The demolition plan will go next to the city's historic preservation commission. A vote is expected in about two months.

If anyone appeals the decision, the issue moves to the city council.

One city planner can't understand the rush to demolish the bridge.

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Lang said insurance concerns are paramount because children are seen regularly playing on it. Preservationists who study the facts will realize there are no alternatives, he said.

"One way, we can save it," he said. "The other way, we're going to lose it."

The bridge is listed on the city's Historic Building Survey as a prominent local attraction.

But it has faced demolition before.

In 1939, county supervisors decided to tear it down to make way for a wider concrete span. When Santa Cruz High School teacher Robert Burton heard, he raised \$250 and a team of Works Progress Administration laborers to save it.

Volunteers working with awkward rollers moved the bridge up the road to DeLaveaga Park. According to published accounts, it got stuck at a sharp curve, blocking traffic for several days until a tractor pulled it free.

In the decades since, the bridge has been a familiar sight to motorists driving north of Santa Cruz toward the Mystery Spot tourist park.

The bridge is one of three surviving covered bridges in Santa Cruz County.

One in downtown Felton was built in 1892. The other, at Paradise Park on Highway 9, was built in 1872.