

Bridges

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Historic bridge should be replaced, says report

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SANTA CRUZ — The historic wooden West Cliff Drive bridge, closed two years ago, would be a technical and political quagmire to repair, with no guarantee of success.

Instead of repairing it, the bridge should be replaced, according to a recommendation from city Public Works Director Larry Erwin that is scheduled to be considered by the Santa Cruz City Council tonight.

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

It is listed in the Historic Highway Bridges of California as an example of the only truss of its kind in the state, and is eligible for the National Historic Register.

However, the old bridge no longer is structurally adequate. Its underpinnings are hollowed from years of dry rot, and Caltrans closed it to traffic in 1992.

It since has reopened to bicyclists and pedestrians, with short-term structural repairs.

In the past three years, city officials have gone back and forth on what to do with the old bridge —

save it or replace it.

The bridge is eligible for federal funds that would pay 80 percent of the estimated costs of replacing it, an option that the Public Works Department had been pursuing. A 1986 estimate said it would cost \$1 million to replace.

Councilwoman Katherine Beiers, however, was critical of that track and wanted rehabilitation studied.

Based on further studies, Erwin has concluded there are significant obstacles to saving the structure that make it unlikely. Caltrans would have to make exceptions to its policy prohibiting timber bridges. That's doubtful, said City Manager Richard Wilson, who said no exceptions have been granted.

Caltrans would also have to relax design rules regarding crash safety barrier rails, which are typically concrete or metal, not wooden, said Wilson.

Even if Caltrans agrees and funds its share of the construction, the increased costs of maintaining a wooden bridge would be the city's, said Wilson.

Meanwhile, traffic would continue to worsen. If the bridge were rehabilitated, it would become a one-lane, one-way road, because of its substandard width, he said.