



Ken Schoetz, left, Peace Bridge Authority chairman, and Ron Rienas, authority general manager, inspect a model of the three-span arch at The Buffalo News.
Bill Wippert /Buffalo News

Peace Bridge construction may start in 2012

Authority still backing three-span arch design

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Peace Bridge officials are sticking with a three-span arch design for a new bridge next to the Peace Bridge and are taking steps to start construction in the summer of 2012.

Until now, bridge officials had planned to start work on a new inspections and duty-free plaza first.

But the Peace Bridge Authority's eligibility for as much as \$100 million in Canadian federal aid toward a new bridge has prompted bridge officials to rethink how to stage the project.

Unless bridge work starts first, the authority would likely lose out on the Canadian aid, because the program that administers that aid expects the funded projects to be finished by 2014, said Ron Rienas, general manager of the authority, formally known as the Buffalo and Fort Erie Public Bridge Authority.

That aid only partly explains why authority officials are so reluctant to reconsider anything other than the three-span arch design.

The arch concept garnered the most public support among five design choices at open houses held by the authority and also during a public comment period earlier this year.

"For us to circle back and look at something other than what came out of the process will add a significant amount of time, would be legally challengeable and probably result in us no longer getting access to Canadian government funding," Rienas said during a meeting with the editorial board of The Buffalo News.

Nearly 600 people viewed the five proposed designs and had a chance to talk to federal and state regulators and bridge designers at the Peace Bridge Authority's open houses in January and February in the Connecticut Street Armory and in Fort Erie, Ont. Others voiced their opinions during the public comment period that followed. Sixty percent supported the arch design as their favorite concept.

Bridge officials said they have not learned or heard anything since then to persuade them to discard the arch design in favor of any of the two- and three-tower cable-stayed designs that also were under consideration.

"Everything still points in that direction," Ken Schoetz, chairman of the Peace Bridge Authority, said of the arch design during the News meeting.

But to some, the three-span arch design pales in comparison with the signature, landmark bridges recently built in other cities across the nation.

Critics complain that the authority has bowed to bureaucrats who recommended a bridge design that defers to birds rather than to the public.

"The three-arch span falls short," said Clinton Brown, co-founder of SuperSpan Upper Niagara, which more than a decade ago called for an architecturally dramatic six-lane bridge as a replacement.

"The Public Bridge Authority has come a long way making an efficient bridge system," Brown said. "Now we need a bridge whose aspirations reflect the people of Buffalo and Fort Erie."

The public should heed the late-U.S. Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan's call for "a new gateway, a defining moment of entry," Brown said.

"We're closer, but we're not there yet," Brown said of the three-span arch concept.

Bridge officials, however, said choosing a different design concept, or scrapping the earlier public input process just to hold another, would open the authority to charges it was trying to select its own choice. In recent years, authority officials have said they would pursue whatever bridge design won public support, so long as it could win regulatory approval.

The five bridge design concepts exhibited at the open houses were all precleared by federal and state regulators. Their approval meant that any of the five could be pursued without planners being caught by surprise by last-minute environmental concerns. That's what happened in April 2008 when the agencies killed Swiss

designer Christian Menn's 567-foot-high cable-stayed bridge proposal, despite its selection by a design jury, for fear that its height would kill too many common terns and migratory birds.

"We have a process for deciding public projects like this," Schoetz said. "Whether I like the design or not -- and every one of us would probably draw it up differently -- the process was fair. It produced a result that was somewhat unexpected, but it is the result we expect now will be coming up for final approval."

More than 700 people -- mostly Americans -- participated in the public input process. Bridge designers and regulators provided information to them but did not steer them into voting for a certain alternative, he said.

"I don't think people voted the way they did because they got fooled," Schoetz said.

Now, if everything falls the authority's way -- and little has in the past decade -- construction of the new bridge could start in the summer of 2012.

Bridge officials said a new bridge would help traffic flow even if it's connected to the existing U.S. plaza, before an expanded plaza gets built. They hope to submit a final environmental impact statement to City Hall for approval sometime in December. That document will spell out the plan.

"We expect we're going to get City Hall approval, one way or the other," Schoetz said. "We think when a final vote comes up, and you put a Common Council member on the clock for voting yes or no for an international bridge crossing, that we will have the support. We've been working and talking with members of the Common Council over the last three months."

"I expect, in the end, after the usual Buffalo hand-wringing and angst, that we will have support of the Buffalo Common Council," he said.

If the Common Council approves the project a month or two after receiving the document, the authority in the early spring of 2011 would seek federal approval to start the project, Rienas said.

No construction would start -- on the bridge or the plaza -- until the federal government issues a record of decision approving both a new bridge and expanded plaza.

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