

Healdsburg bridge makes national register

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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Published: Wednesday, April 27, 2011 at 4:28 p.m.

Healdsburg's Memorial Bridge has been added to the National Register of Historic Places, validating the efforts of residents who rallied to save it.

The 90-year-old span, the first modern traffic bridge in Healdsburg over the Russian River, was nominated by preservationists who highlighted its importance from the early days of the automobile.



Healdsburg Memorial Bridge, built in 1921, has been added to the National Register of Historic Places

“It kind of cements the fact it truly is a historic structure,” said Mel Amato, the Healdsburg electrical engineer who helped convince officials the bridge was sturdier than an old Caltrans report had indicated.

“It's frosting on the cake,” he said.

Federal officials last week announced their decision to put the iconic bridge in the Register of Historic Places. It joins three other Healdsburg-area places on the list: the old Carnegie Library, now the home of the Healdsburg Museum and Historical Society; Madrona Manor; and Hop Kiln Winery.

Amato said the bridge's eligibility for the federal listing led to more thorough environmental analysis and public comment when the City Council was attempting to determine the fate of the crossing.

“If nothing else it will help ensure the decision the council made to proceed with rehabilitation will move forward,” he said.

The fate of the 1921 bridge — whether to rehabilitate it or build a new one — was debated off and on for several decades. The vintage, steel-truss structure carried the old Redwood Highway over the Russian River, but was eventually supplanted by a new Highway 101 bridge to the west.

The bridge's narrowness and questions about earthquake and flood safety made its future uncertain, especially in light of a 1979 Caltrans report that gave it a failing grade.

But several years ago, the ratings used by Caltrans were found to be in error. After a revision, state engineers acknowledged the bridge is capable of carrying all legal loads.

Preservationists emphasized that the bridge, built in the architectural style known as Pennsylvania petit, is one of only a few of its kind in the U.S. still carrying vehicles.

“We decided very early on after we organized that we wanted to get the bridge listed in the National Register,” said David Dietz, a member of the Friends of the Healdsburg Memorial Bridge. “We felt very strongly about its importance to the town — its architectural importance and what it meant to the region. It helped develop the Redwood Empire.”

In September, the City Council, bowing to prevailing public opinion, decided to save the structure.

The bridge upgrade is estimated to cost \$17.3 million. Some seismic retrofit is scheduled for this summer, but the major rehabilitation work is expected to occur next year following more detailed environmental study, public comment and design work.

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