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Bridge's future faces year-long study[Print Page](#)***City Council calls for "equal footing" analysis of modern replacement or historic rehabilitation*****By Rollie Atkinson
Staff Writer**

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After receiving a consulting engineer's report in September 2007 on the faulty condition of the Healdsburg Avenue Bridge — called Memorial Bridge by most people — one city council member remarked it could take 14 months just to get ready to do a more detailed study on whether to repair or replace the 88-year-old steel girder structure.



Historic or hazard? - Caltrans says the 88-year-old Healdsburg Avenue (Memorial) Bridge is overdue for replacement. Local citizens want to save it from demolition. - PHOTO BY ROLLIE ATKINSON

Which means everything's pretty much on schedule as the council this week authorized staff to proceed with just such a study.

Next comes another 14-month review process after the city expects to award a \$1 million contract in January for preliminary engineering and environmental reviews. The state's Caltrans will pay for at least \$885,300 of that study.

If the state or city has any money left, construction on a new or rehabilitated Healdsburg Avenue Bridge is still years away.

Replacing the bridge with a new concrete box structure would cost \$23 million or as much as \$43 million, based on Caltrans formulas while safety renovations and repairs would cost \$8 million, according to other estimates.

After listening to a series of impassioned pleas to save the rusty silver bridge, the city council gave assurances to their public that the study will not favor replacement or rehabilitation while studying both options at the same time.

"I think we all have a near and dear place in our hearts for that old bridge," Mayor Eric Ziedrich said after 60 minutes of public testimony. "At the beginning (14 months ago) we wanted Caltrans to commit as much money as possible to this study and I think that game plan has worked.

"Now I think we're headed in a unanimous decision to move ahead on looking at rehabbing the bridge while doing a full study," he added.

Some of the public to testify Monday were concerned the bid request wording seemed to favor wholesale replacement above repair or retrofitting the original structure.

Public Works Director Michael Kirn explained a full cost-benefit study, along with environmental impacts would be studied for both options. The two options are on "equal footing," Kirn assured.

"If we eliminated one of the options at the beginning and found we had to go back and study it later it would prove more costly (to study)," Kirn explained.

According to Caltrans safety ratings, the Healdsburg Avenue Bridge is technically unsafe and qualifies for replacement. Over the course of the past 14 months Healdsburg resident Mel Amato has successfully challenged the Caltrans ratings to improve its overall score and move it closer to eligibility for rehabilitation and not demolition.

In either case, the city would pay less than 20 percent of the full project cost, since the bridge has qualified for California's Highway Bridge Program.

Until the next consultant study with more engineering measurements and a full-blown environmental assessment is completed, some facts about the bridge will remain in dispute, based on recent dialogue between Kirn, Amato and Caltrans.

In the meantime, the city finds itself in a "do nothing" mode. "Without this \$1 million study grant we wouldn't be having this discussion," Councilman Jim Wood said at Monday's meeting. "We've had to cut our budget and go without a lot of services." Even after the completed study next year, Wood said, "we may not have the money to do either option."

Wood said he does not favor replacement or repair of the bridge at this time but declared himself "on Mel's side in this David versus Goliath story."

Amato and others thanked Kirn for his extra work and "transparency" in addressing their concerns for saving the bridge which Amato said is eligible for historical status.

Poss Pragoff and Richard Burg both urged saving the bridge for its landmark status and its design that requires everyone to "slow down."

"It's a pedestrian-friendly structure. I really love it," said Hank Skewis.

Councilman Tom Chambers and others urged a careful calculation of long term maintenance costs if the old bridge is repaired. "There's a lot of deferred maintenance there. It's worthwhile taking a real long term look at it."

Replacement options for the bridge will likely consider some road and approach realignments, preliminary reports stated. A replacement project could close the river crossing for a year or longer while a repair of the old bridge would not take as long.

Although the Caltrans safety ratings give the bridge a "failing" grade, most of low safety score is due to the narrowness of the bridge and not actual structural weaknesses, Kirn said.

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