

THE HEALDSBURG TRIBUNE &gt; NEWS

**New numbers for old bridge**[Print Page](#)**by Rollie Atkinson**  
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Consulting engineers are finished climbing over, inspecting, measuring and testing Healdsburg's old Memorial Bridge and are now putting together new safety and structural numbers and ratings for a pending city council review on plans to either repair or replace the 89-year-old steel span over the Russian River.

A consultant's report and city council review is expected to take place later this summer.

Among all the numbers now being compiled and analyzed is one big one that will most influence which option the city might ultimately choose. And that number is how much Caltrans may be willing to contribute to the very expensive project.

Historic, visual and environmental sentiments favored by a vocal and active group of citizens called Save Our Bridge will have to overcome a Caltrans and federal highway standard of "economic superiority" that includes a "life cycle cost analysis."

Renovation of the old bridge has been estimated to cost \$9 million while a modern concrete replacement on a new alignment could cost between \$23-\$43 million, based on older Caltrans studies.

A new bridge would be rated with a 75-year lifespan while the older bridge's expected lifespan would be much less, according to preliminary engineer findings.

In March, following much public testimony to save the old bridge, the city council directed city staff and consultant Omni Means to do full studies of both renovating the existing bridge and calculating costs and benefits of a new bridge.

Both alternatives — replace or rehab — will be included throughout a complete Environmental Impact Review process expected to last into next year.

"Sometime soon we will want to sit down and have a very frank conversation with Caltrans and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) before we bring any proposed options forward," said Mike Kirn, the city's Public Works Director. "We will want to know what proposal they would be willing to support."

The bridge project is qualified for state and federal funding under the California Highway Bridge Program. The city-owned bridge could win as much as 88 percent state and federal funding under the program, subject to the final consulting engineers' report and Caltrans peer review of any proposed project.

"The question could be between doing a project with 88 percent state and federal funding or a 100 percent locally funded project," said Kirn. A local-only project would be "cost prohibitive" in the current economy, Kirn added.

There are numerous structural, functional and seismic problems with the old bridge. A 1979 Caltrans report gave the bridge a "zero" failed grade, finding the bridge could not support its own weight.

Healdsburg resident Mel Amato, now leading the Save Our Bridge citizen brigade, found major errors in the earlier Caltrans report that led to an improved rating that made the bridge worthy of further study and possible renovation.

During two recent "Open House" meetings led by the bridge consultants, some 15 proposed projects and alternatives were defined from public input.

The Omni Means team is now completing cost, environmental, safety, right-of-way, design and funding capability analyses on all 15 proposals.

A "preferred concept" is supposed to be identified and recommended by Omni Means and city staff to the city council this summer.

Doug Ries, of Omni Means, told The Tribune this week that none of the 15 options has been eliminated so far. The most recent engineer tests gave the bridge a 42.3 Structural Rating on a scale of 1 to 100. Any grade below 80 triggers an alarm that a bridge needs repairs and maintenance. A grade below 50 signals a bridge may need total replacement.

In response to the most recent bridge studies, Healdsburg's Amato told the city he found a series of errors. He said the bridge's Structural Rating should be 53.4. Amato believes this "above 50" rating makes the bridge eligible only for rehabilitation and not replacement under FHWA funding guidelines.

"Mr. Amato is wrong," project engineer Todd Goolkasian, of Cornerstone Structural Engineering, told The Tribune. "I can unequivocally say the 50 rating is not a hard threshold. Caltrans must follow federal guidelines that prohibit funding a plan that is not economically superior."

Kirn confirmed that Caltrans has recently told the city the bridge is still potentially eligible for both rehab or replacement.

Amato this week stood by his independent analysis. "What I read and reported was plain English, not opinion. The evidence to me is pretty clear and I believe the engineers have made some mistakes. Why should we assume they are right this time?"

On other baseline findings, the ongoing engineer and project analysis has confirmed some hard facts about the old bridge, focused on its narrow width and aging riverbed foundation.

Healdsburg's Memorial Bridge is "functionally obsolete" because it is too narrow. The bridge also needs major seismic earthquake safety work. The steel truss design, like the recently-collapsed Bay Bridge, is "fracture critical," meaning new redundant steel work and supports would have to be added to improve its safety rating.

Engineer Goolkasian said needed safety and structural repairs would be a "practical impossibility" without causing severe damage to the historic bridge's "fabric" and visual attraction.

Any project to widen the bridge would require cutting it in half, lengthwise and adding major new piers in the riverbed.

"Ultimately, it's going to be who's judgement counts," said Goolkasian, referring to the federal funding formula. For the city to get funding help, "Caltrans must assure the Feds (FHWA) that they are following the rules."

Kirn said it is the city's responsibility to do whatever it can to make the river crossing more safe. "We are identifying the weaknesses and problems with our bridge. Caltrans may come up with one preference, but will that be the best answer for the community?" Kirn asked.

While some better cost estimates and funding sources may be known this summer, the answer to what the community wants to do with their old bridge and what can be afforded won't be answered until the completed EIR study and public testimony will concluded in late 2011.

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