

George Boardman
Columnist

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Officials lead from behind in Bridgeport rescue effort



George Boardman

Observations from the center stripe: Ask Placer High edition

IF PLACER High School can figure out a way to play both the Nevada Union and Bear River football teams, why can't NU and Bear River play each other? ... BANNERS, POSTERS and signs promoting the Nevada County Fair are popping up everywhere, the most aggressive promotion of the event I've seen in 14 years ... I DON'T know what it says about foodies who are willing to pay \$175 to eat a farm-to-fork dinner on the Tower Bridge in Sacramento, but I prefer to avoid the redolent scent of oil and grease on a bed of asphalt when dining ... ON THE other hand, you can "Sample the Sierra" at Bijou Community Park in South Lake Tahoe on Aug. 31 for just \$30 ... PROOF THIS country's getting older: Proctor and Gamble's baby diaper business has dropped 8 percent since 2009, but the adult diapers segment has jumped 20 percent ... IT'S APPARENTLY never too early to start betting on football games. For those so inclined, the 49ers open the season as 4 point favorites at Dallas, while the Raiders are 4.5 point underdogs at the New York Jets ...

The Bridgeport Covered Bridge, a National Historic Site since 1971 and an icon of our local tourist industry, is still fenced off from visitors almost three years after it was deemed unsafe for pedestrians.

It could be another four years before anybody walks on the bridge again. That assumes a bad winter — the kind most Californians are praying for — doesn't wash it away before then.

While that hardly rivals the 24 years it took to build a new eastern span for the Bay Bridge, seven years is a long time for a wooden structure that's only 243 feet long and supposedly loved by the history-loving residents of Nevada County.

But all of that was forgotten when Gov. Jerry Brown's 2014-15 budget, which includes \$1.26 million to repair the bridge, was approved by the state Legislature last month. The joy was almost unrestrained.

"Because we joined together as a community and made our voices heard in Sacramento, (the bridge) will receive the attention it needs so that it may be enjoyed by generations to come," said Supervisor Hank Weston, whose district includes the bridge.

"We have demonstrated once again how powerful a force a united community can be," added Caleb Dardick, executive director of the South Yuba River Citizens League.

David Anderson, president of the South Yuba River Park Association, expressed similar sentiments during the victory celebration, but later told the Sacramento Bee what a lot of people are feeling:

"In three years, the only thing we've done to the bridge physically is a chain-link fence. It drives me crazy."

We probably wouldn't be this far along on the rescue mission if it weren't for volunteers, nonprofit groups and others pressing the issue in Sacramento. For the most part, our elected officials at the state, county and local levels were following instead of leading.

After the bridge was closed in the fall of 2011, the state parks and recreation department said in April 2012 — the 150th anniversary of the bridge — that repairs would cost \$680,000.

Ranger Don Schmidt of the South Yuba River State Park said the parks department was confident it could get a grant and supplement that with excess state transportation funds to cover the work, which could begin as early as July 2012.

The work didn't happen, but the repair estimate almost doubled to \$1.2 million by January of 2013. The state said then it could get \$540,000 from the federal government for long-term repairs, but would have to find \$90,000 from other sources to stabilize the bridge. That prompted area residents to start a campaign to raise the money needed to repair the bridge. The South Yuba River State Park Association and SYRCL joined the money-raising effort and lobbied in Sacramento to pressure park officials to speed up repairs.

An excellent lobbying opportunity occurred in June 2013 when a group of state legislators led by Assemblyman Brian Dahle visited the Empire Mine State Historic Park. Alas, the visitors toured the mine, discussed the pollution problem, and were briefed on the Malakoff Diggins State Historic Park, according to a report in The Union.

Dardick managed to get in a few words about the need to repair the bridge, though you have to wonder how much impact they had in the context of the day's activities.

The board of supervisors took up the issue last December, urging the state to allocate funds to restore the bridge.

"It's very embarrassing to me to have people come up here to see the bridge and there is an ugly old fence that keeps them from walking on it," Weston said, more than two years after it was closed.

The city councils of Grass Valley, Nevada City and Truckee also joined the crusade just days before Brown rolled out his budget that included \$1.26 million to repair the bridge. But there was a catch: \$318,000 would be spent on the project in fiscal year 2014-15 and \$943,000 in 2016-17.

The supervisors, showing a sense of urgency that wasn't apparent earlier, wanted the money spent faster than that, writing "the project is urgently needed so the park can resume contributing substantial funds to the region's economy."

While there was no active opposition to the funding request, the Save Our Bridge committee felt compelled to launch a letter-writing campaign to get the money approved and speed up the spending.

Weston and others went to Sacramento in March to testify at a state Senate budget subcommittee hearing chaired by Senator Jim Nielsen, which agreed to recommend the speed-up. (They apparently missed another vote Nielsen's subcommittee took that day, approving a recommendation to consider dumping the Empire Mine as a state park because of costly, ongoing pollution problems.) Nothing changed when the revised state budget was published in May, and now the work may not get done until 2018 or later. (Neither Nielsen nor Dahle mentioned the bridge in their comments on the revised budget.)

Work to stabilize the bridge is scheduled to begin in September. Local bridge backers think the work can be done in six to eight weeks, but the state is giving the contractor until the end of the year to finish the job.

The real work of restoring the bridge will take much longer. The state said it needs time to acquire the necessary permits and find a contractor with experience in bridge restoration.

Each piece of the bridge that isn't salvageable must be replaced with an exact replica in order to retain the bridge's status as a historic landmark.

Meanwhile, World Weather Watch predicts a 52 percent to 66 percent chance of El Nino conditions developing this winter. Given how long it has taken to get this far, it may take forever to rebuild a washed-out bridge.

George Boardman, a member of The Union Editorial Board, lives at Lake of the Pines. His column is published Mondays in The Union.

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