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AT WHAT COST?



Some residents have been fighting for a new span since the closure of the Centerton Road Bridge in 2015. [CARL KOSOLA / STAFF PHOTOJOURNALIST]

Feasibility study spells out price of replacing Centerton Road Bridge

By Danielle DeSisto, Kelly Kultys and David Levinsky
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It was just over three years ago that Burlington County Engineer Joseph Brickley got a frantic phone call from workers about Centerton Road Bridge.

Members of his engineering team were installing a traffic counter beneath the more than century-old steel span across the Rancocas Creek when they saw the bridge sag and sway at its abutments, an alarming structural deficiency and a clear safety risk.

Brickley rushed to the scene and saw for himself just how bad the damage was to the bridge support structure. "It was clearly moving at the abutments and the loss of the steel was obvious," he recalled. "You could see the holes."

It would become the

final day a motor vehicle crossed the historic span, as Brickley ordered immediate closure, setting into motion years of discussions, study and debate over what to do next about the historic bridge and its link between Westampton, Willingboro and Mount Laurel.

Three years later, some county officials believe they finally have the information needed to reach a decision, as a feasibility study of potential replacement options for the bridge has been completed and presented to the county Board of Freeholders.

The \$261,000 study undertaken by three professional firms — Maser Consulting, AECOM, and Richard Grubb and Associates — paints a stark picture about the projected costs, ranging from about \$5.5 million to build a new bridge solely for pedestrian and bicycle traffic, to \$37 million to build a new moveable, swing bridge similar to the existing span.

The other options analyzed included demolishing the bridge and not replacing it and building a new fixed bridge suitable for motor vehicles but without the capability of swing to provide boat access.

The first option will cost nothing more than the projected \$1.3 million demolition expense. The latter choice is projected to cost around \$25 million.

The cost of a replacement span has previously been a concern of the Freeholder Board, which had previously ruled out repairing the existing bridge due to its age, deficiencies and substandard features.

Replacing the bridge has become a controversial issue and some residents have lobbied for a replacement span, arguing that its loss has impacted quality of life for residents who must now deal with traffic on Interstate 295, which is now the main route to cross the Rancocas

without the bridge.

"I sent a letter to (Sen.) Cory Booker, (Sen. Bob) Menendez and (Rep. Tom) MacArthur just really trying to see about this whole funding issue (to rebuild it) — how (the closing) even was allowed to occur," said Mount Laurel resident Lori Howard, who founded the Facebook group Rebuild Centerton Road Bridge. "They're putting money towards other bridges with no justification as to why you're letting other bridges just crumble to the ground."

The group has gathered more than 4,300 signatures on a petition advocating for the bridge's replacement.

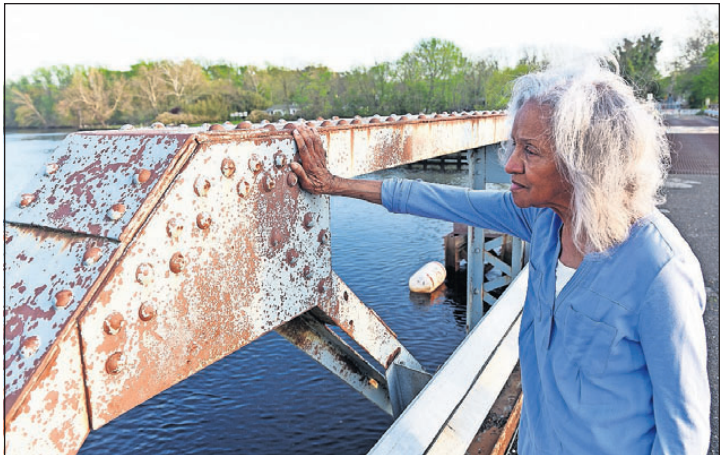
Howard grew up in Willingboro and said she and her mother, Doris, still have many friends there on the other side of the Rancocas. Neither like using I-295.

"I used to take the bridge — three or four times,

See BRIDGE, A8



Ruth Cranmer and her husband Barry Cranmer, of Mount Laurel, stand in front of a sign blocking the Centerton Road Bridge near their home in Mount Laurel on Wednesday. [CARL KOSOLA / STAFF PHOTOJOURNALIST]



Doris Howard, of Moorestown, drove over the Centerton Road Bridge for more than 40 years before it closed due to structural deficiencies. [CARL KOSOLA / STAFF PHOTOJOURNALIST]

Murphy signs bill in lieu of GOP tax overhaul

Towns now can create charitable funds that homeowners can contribute to in return for property tax credits

By David Levinsky
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Saying he wants to protect middle-class families from "taking it on the chin" from the new federal tax law, Gov. Phil Murphy signed into law legislation Friday that's intended to help New Jersey taxpayers escape paying higher taxes because of the federal measure's controversial cap on state and local taxes deductions.

The Democratic governor signed the legislation in East Rutherford during a ceremony, where he also announced the appointment of two former mayors to serve as the administration's shared services czars.

Murphy said both his actions are designed to help shield New Jersey taxpayers from the loss of the full federal deduction for state and local taxes, also known as SALT, that the Republican tax overhaul has now capped at \$10,000.

Some 41 percent of New Jersey taxpayers have typically claimed the deduction on their federal returns in large part because of the state's notoriously high property taxes and steeply rising state income tax.

Capping the write off was considered one of the most controversial aspect of the federal law, particularly in high-tax states like New Jersey, New York, Illinois and California.

"We know that President Trump and the Republican leadership in Congress targeted states like New Jersey when they wrote this law," Murphy said Friday about the SALT cap, which he claimed would cost New Jersey taxpayers who itemize on average \$8,000 in lost deductions.

"It is a de facto tax hike on countless New Jersey households," he said.

See MURPHY, A2

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BRIDGE

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sometimes it would be three to four times a day on this bridge going from Willingboro back to Moorestown,” Doris Howard said. “But after it closed, I very seldom come this way now. I don’t like to go out on 295 because it’s too dangerous for me to be driving.”

Other residents said losing the bridge has reduced traffic in their neighborhood and that rebuilding the span would be a waste of taxpayer dollars.

“I feel like rebuilding the bridge is unnecessary,” said Carly Hudson, of Mount Laurel. “It seems like such a waste — I just don’t see the point in it. I don’t think it’s a good project for the county to be working on.”

Questions remain

Finding a funding source beyond county taxpayer dollars may be difficult. Burlington County’s annual state transportation funding has essentially doubled as a result of the 2016 agreement between then-Gov. Chris Christie and the New Jersey Legislature that raised the state’s gas tax 28 cents to reauthorize the state Transportation Trust Fund for eight years. Yet Brickley said either of the two motor-vehicle bridge replacement projects would exceed the \$2 million in annual funding the county receives from the Local Bridges, Future Needs Program, which is typically tapped for bridge repair projects.

The county is responsible for a total of 412 bridges and projects typically cost between \$4 million and \$5 million.

“For the amount of money (a motor-vehicle bridge) would cost, I could repair four or five bridges,” Brickley said.

The county also receives some \$9.8 million in annual transportation funding from the state, but that money typically is used for the repaving and road repairs on the county’s more than 500 miles of highways.

Federal dollars for transportation infrastructure could be available through the Transportation Improvement Program, also known as TIP, but Brickley warned that replacing Centerton Road Bridge is unlikely to be approved for funding because of its close proximity to I-295, which also crosses the Rancocas Creek, making the span redundant.

I-295 is visible from Centerton Road Bridge, and a traffic study on the interstate since the bridge’s closure concluded there had been no negative impact from the additional traffic diverted to the highway. In fact, county officials believe there’s evidence a fourth lane was placed on the stretch of I-295 between the Beverly-Rancocas Road interchange in Westampton and Creek Road in Delran, when the interstate was built in 1971, specifically to accommodate extra traffic anticipated from the eventual closure of Centerton Road Bridge.

Traffic across the 312-foot-long bridge averaged about 14,000 vehicles a day before it closed.

Willingboro police said they’ve noticed no major impact on traffic or accidents in their town since the span was closed, and Mount Laurel Mayor Richard Van Noord said the town has not received any complaints from residents about the loss of the bridge.

“We’ve had no discernible difference,” Van Noord said.

County officials said I-295 provides a fast alternative to Centerton Road, but residents in the area insist they are often delayed by traffic on the interstate.

Nancy Burkley, who lives in the Rancocas section of Westampton, said she used Centerton Road to get to her doctor’s appointments in Moorestown and Mount



The Centerton Road Bridge, which links Mount Laurel to Westampton and Willingboro, has been closed to motorists for more than 2 years. [CARL KOSOLA / STAFF PHOTOJOURNALIST]

Centerton road bridge: What are the options?

A study by three consulting firms outlines options for the future of Centerton Road Bridge. The Burlington County Board of Chosen Freeholders will determine the bridge’s fate.

Demolish the bridge without a replacement.

\$1.3 million

Build a pedestrian bridge accommodating foot and bicycle traffic.

\$5.5 million

Build a new fixed bridge suitable for motor vehicles, but without swing capability for boat access.

\$25 million

Build a new moveable swing bridge similar to the existing span.

\$37 million

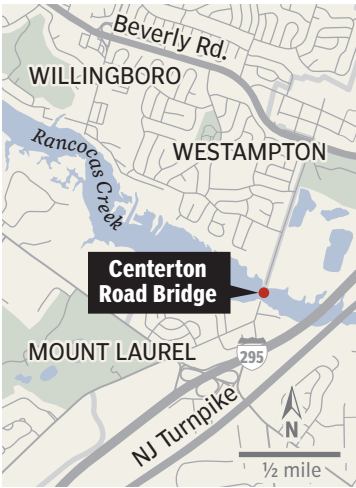
Source: Centerton Road Bridge Replacement Feasibility Study by Maser Consulting, AECOM and Richard Grubb and Associates

GATEHOUSE MEDIA

If You Go

The Burlington County Freeholders are hosting a public presentation on the feasibility study during their regular bi-monthly meeting Wednesday at 7 p.m. at 49 Rancocas Road in Mount Holly.

The county’s feasibility study is available at co.burlington.nj.us/CivicAlerts.aspx?AID=880.



Source: maps4news.com/©HERE

GATEHOUSE MEDIA

Laurel, as well as to go shopping. However, she said she’s had her share of issues getting to them due to the traffic on I-295.

“Between (exit) 45 and the Delran exit there are constant accidents that slow down 295,” she said. “Older people get very nervous driving on 295.”

No business in the area has likely been impacted more than Carlucci’s Waterfront, which sits on the creek in close proximity to the bridge. Since its closing, fewer customers, including several of the establishment’s regulars, have dined there, according to manager Carlo Capuano.

“They don’t want to use Route 295,” Capuano said. “They weren’t just using (the bridge) as a cut-through. A lot of people have anxiety about driving on highways.”

Capuano questioned how county officials let the bridge get to the point of disrepair that it became dangerous enough to close.

“If it means something to the community, they should have kept it up,” he said, adding that he has accepted the possibility the bridge may not be replaced.

“(The bridge) is not going to make or break us,” Capuano said. “We’re still going to persevere and thrive.”

The feasibility study identified numerous other hurdles and considerations for the replacement bridge options, including the environmental impacts and permits that would be required and the necessity of acquiring privately owned easements to widen the approaches for all three versions.

According to the study, building a fixed motor-vehicle bridge would require the most land, since the road would need to be widened and raised to bring the bridge 12 feet above the water, the height required

so that most boats can easily navigate beneath it.

Ten property owners would likely be impacted, including the former Rowan estate in Westampton that the county already owns, according to the report.

Views along the creek would also be impacted and an existing water main would need to be relocated for either of the two motor-vehicle bridges.

Westampton resident Gil Gehin-Scott is one of the property owners whose land would likely be impacted if the county was to rebuild the bridge.

He said he’s surprised the county would even consider it, given its redundancy.

He and other residents claim the quality of life in their neighborhood has improved since the bridge was closed to vehicles.

“We have no sidewalks and the speed limit is 25 mph,” he said. “When the bridge was open, drivers grossly disregarded the speed limit and there were regular instances of passing in the no-passing zone.”

Weighing the options

The county has already received final approvals from the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection’s Historic Preservation Office, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Coast Guard to remove the existing bridge, but the feasibility study anticipates significant time for the county to complete the required design and planning work and complete demolition.

A pedestrian and bicycle bridge would likely take three



The Centerton Road Bridge remains closed in Mount Laurel. [CARL KOSOLA / STAFF PHOTOJOURNALIST]

“It’s an emotional thing because it’s a historic bridge in a historic county. But that wouldn’t be a responsible use of taxpayer dollars.”

Freeholder Director Kate Gibbs

to five years to complete from the start of planning and design to the end of construction, according to the report. The motor-vehicle bridges would take longer, with estimates ranging from six to seven years for the fixed bridge and seven to eight years for the moveable span.

Brickley’s official recommendation is for the county to rebuild the bridge solely for pedestrian and bicycle traffic. Doing so would continue to provide a crossing that connects the communities without the significant costs and other hurdles related to building a new bridge capable of handling motor vehicles.

The five-member Freeholder Board — which is currently divided with three Republicans and two Democrats — has yet to vote on a plan for replacing the bridge. A public presentation concerning the bridge and feasibility study is expected to be made at the board’s next public meeting on Wednesday, officials said.

Freeholder Director Kate Gibbs said she could not speak for the other elected freeholders, but that she favors the pedestrian and bicycle-only span. She said such a project could help connect several trails the county hopes to develop between its parkland along the creek and would likely make it eligible for grant funding, including those offered by corporations and nonprofits.

Gibbs, who is a business development leader with the Operating Engineers Local 825 union, said she is sympathetic to those residents who want the bridge replaced and reopened for motor vehicles, but that option appears too expensive for the benefit of allowing vehicles to avoid using I-295.

“It’s an emotional thing because it’s a historic bridge in a historic county,” she said last week. “But that wouldn’t be a responsible use of taxpayer dollars.”

“We have to make sure we make decisions based on all our municipalities and find

common sense solutions for all our residents,” she added.

Freeholder Balvir Singh, who is one of two Democrats on the board, said he’s read the study and heard Brickley’s presentation. But he said he’s not ready to vote on a replacement bridge plan.

“We have to talk to the officials from Mount Laurel and Willingboro and the other surrounding communities,” he said. “Demolition, as far as that’s concerned, I’m in favor of because there are safety issues. But other than that, we shouldn’t move forward without hearing more from the people who are impacted.”

The issue of the bridge has often taken on a political edge in the past, and it seems likely it will again with majority control of the Freeholder Board at stake in November.

Singh recalled former Freeholder Director Bruce Garganio, who was unseated last year by Singh and fellow Democrat Tom Pullion’s surprise election victory, touting the importance of the gas tax increase in order to provide funding for replacing Centerton Road Bridge.

“I’m wondering what’s changed from that (Freeholder) director and this director,” Singh said last week. “I thought that was why we passed the gas tax.”

Gibbs said the findings from the feasibility study are posted on the county website and demonstrate that the board has gone “above and beyond” in its due diligence on the issue.

“This isn’t something that will be decided without data and without input,” she said. “We want to make sure we’re doing everything above board and open. I’m hoping we’ll be able to have people come to meetings and express their opinions. But at the end of the day, the decision isn’t going to be about these two communities, it’s all 40 we have to think of.”

Information from the county’s feasibility study is available at co.burlington.nj.us/documentcenter/view/7986.

Rebuilding Centerton Road Bridge for pedestrians

By Danielle DeSisto, Kelly Kultys and David Levinsky
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MOUNT LAUREL — Tracey Gilliam leaned along the edge of the Centerton Road Bridge last week, enjoying the peace and quiet surrounding him on one of the first warm days of spring.

“It’s soothing,” he said, especially for someone like him — a veteran who suffers from post traumatic stress disorder.

The Willingboro resident was one of many who have been using the closed Centerton Road Bridge as a pedestrian crossing since it was shut down three years ago.

Now, Gilliam is one of the county residents who could benefit if the Burlington County Board of Freeholders decides to demolish the current span and build a new pedestrian bridge in its place. The standing bridge was deemed unsafe due to damage to its support structure in April 2015.

Freeholders last month received a look at a feasibility study that laid out potential options for the future of the bridge. The recommendation was to demolish the current structure and build a pedestrian bridge in its place.

But Burlington County officials had started internal discussions about a possible pedestrian bridge over the Rancocas Creek long before Centerton Road Bridge was closed as part of a plan to expand a trail network along the creek.

The county has some 1,200 acres of preserved open space and parklands along the



Robert Collins, 40, of Willingboro, fishes off the Centerton Road Bridge in Willingboro on Wednesday. [CARL KOSOLA / STAFF PHOTOJOURNALIST]



Joshua Hudson, of Mount Laurel, pulls his daughter, Evelyn, 2, as wife, Carly, carries daughter, Madeline, 6 months, on a walk over the Centerton Road Bridge on Thursday. [NANCY ROKOS / STAFF PHOTOJOURNALIST]

creek, known as the Rancocas Greenway, and some 39 miles of biking and hiking trails already exist, including a substantial trail network in Rancocas State Park on the Westampton side of the creek.

There is already a small half-mile trail behind the Rancocas Pointe subdivision that is

accessible from the parking lot of Carlucci’s Waterfront near the bridge. The county’s park master plan also calls for the development of a larger trail along the Rancocas that would connect the Boundry Creek Natural Resource Area in Moorestown with the Rancocas State Park in

Westampton and Hainesport and the existing trails network there.

The county is also interested in developing a trail along Centerton Road in Mount Laurel to the county’s Community Agricultural Center in Moorestown and the Mount Laurel YMCA.

Freeholder Director Kate Gibbs and Mary Pat Robbie, director of the county’s Department of Resource Conservation, said replacing Centerton Road Bridge with a pedestrian-only span would provide the creek crossing needed to connect the trails.

“It’s a cost effective way of dealing with the issue of the bridge and tying it into the greenway,” Gibbs said. “It’s a really good place for a crossing.”

The county also owns the former Rowan estate, an 84-acre parcel of waterfront property adjacent to Centerton Road Bridge that was purchased with county open space money. Officials said it has long been eyed to

become another county park. Officials said the bridge fits into the more than decade-long plan to create a trail network along the Rancocas.

The study estimated the pedestrian bridge would cost around \$5.5 million, but some residents question whether a walking bridge is necessary.

Carlo Capuano, manager of Carlucci’s Waterfront on Rancocas Creek, said he did not see the point of building a pedestrian bridge. Such a span would not bring back the business the restaurant lost following the bridge’s closure, and he would rather see taxpayer dollars go toward a more pressing issue, he said.

“You might as well just knock it down. Who’s going to use a pedestrian bridge?” Capuano said.

Karen Fenton, of the Rancocas section of Westampton, said she’s in favor of rebuilding a vehicular bridge, but a pedestrian bridge would be a waste.

“Regarding a footbridge ... That’s just stupid,” she said. “Where are they walking to? That probably would have been good for Smithville (bridge in Eastampton).”

Still, the county hasn’t made a decision about the fate of the bridge, although Gibbs said the officials are looking into potential funding from the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission and the state Department of Transportation for pedestrian and bicycle paths.

“There are different pots of money we can pursue with this, and we’re going to pursue outside dollars for all phases of this,” Gibbs said of the potential pedestrian bridge. “Because we have an alternative that connects to trails it opens windows of opportunity to go after alternative sources of funding.”

Residents torn on Centerton Road Bridge future

By Kelly Kultys
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For more than 40 years, Ruth and Barry Cranmer dealt with a growing number of cars passing their house each day as traffic over the Centerton Road Bridge grew to carry about 14,000 cars a day by 2015.

“We used to wait 10 to 15 minutes in our driveway to get out,” Ruth Cranmer said.

However, in the past three years since the bridge closed, the Cranmers, who live at the base of the bridge on the Mount Laurel side, said their quality of life has improved immensely.

“It’s been heaven — we hadn’t really realized it,” Barry Cranmer said. “We put up with the road noise for years and years.”

For the Cranmers, the closing of the bridge has been blessing.

For other residents, however, such as Karen Fenton, of the Rancocas section of Westampton, it’s been a nightmare.

“I shop at Centerton Square all the time,” she said. “My doctors are all at the Virtua complex in Moorestown. I never used 295 to access Rancocas Woods (neighborhood in Mount Laurel), Creek Road and businesses on Route 38 near Ark Road. Now, I have to schedule my appointments and shopping to avoid the horrific mess at Creek/295/Centerton.”

Residents living near or frequently using the bridge still don’t have a consensus on what the county should do: rebuild it or not.

Gil Gehin-Scott, who

lives close to the bridge in the Rancocas section of Westampton, said he thinks rebuilding the bridge would only make traffic worse in his town.

“For the county to send a huge volume of commuter traffic with all its associated problems through residential neighborhoods on both sides of the bridge when there exists a perfectly viable alternative, would be incomprehensible, destructive, unsafe and just plain inconsiderate for residents of those neighborhoods,” he said.

However, others like Lori Howard, of Mount Laurel, said closing the bridge has cut many residents off from the rest of the county. She launched a “Rebuild the Centerton Bridge” campaign six months after it closed and has kept it up ever since.

“I actually started it because I felt like it wasn’t right,” she said. “So there’s something deep inside me that’s like, this isn’t right, why is this happening?”

Sheri Provost, a resident of Willingboro, said she believes figures listed in the study were way too high, and that county officials could look into other ways to build a bridge at more cost-effective price.

“I think that they need to rebuild it and I think that the cost that they’re assessing to it is astronomical,” she said.

Provost also said using 295 to access Centerton Road off of the Delran exit is dangerous due to the quick merge off the highway onto Creek Road. Centerton Road is the first light after the merge and Provost said if a person wants to make a left onto the road “you’re risking your life every



Lori Howard, of Mount Laurel, and her mother Doris Howard, of Moorestown, watch a sunset on the Centerton Road Bridge in Willingboro on Wednesday. [CARL KOSOLA / STAFF PHOTOJOURNALIST]



Mount Laurel residents Barry Cranmer and Ruth Cranmer could lose part of their property if a new span is built to replace the Centerton Road Bridge. [CARL KOSOLA / STAFF PHOTOJOURNALIST]

“It’s been heaven — we hadn’t really realized it. We put up with the road noise for years and years.”
Barry Cranmer

single time that you try and make that merge over.”

Mount Laurel resident Tesha Cagle, who works in a dental office in Willingboro, said while the bridge being out has affected her personally, she’s more worried about her elderly patients who have to

now use the highways.

“This is a huge hindrance to their independence,” she said. “They drive to their appointments so they do fine on residential roads but the high speeds of 295 they feel poses too much of a risk.”

For Mount Laurel residents

who live near the bridge, like Carly Hudson, they appreciate the safer streets.

“There’s no sidewalk down here; before we couldn’t walk out there at all,” Hudson said.

Ruth Cranmer said the bridge closing has changed the neighborhood dynamics.

“We actually had someone come over during one of the storms — one of our neighbors for the first time ever to make sure we were OK,” she said.