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ALERT

TOP STORY

Bismarck Park Board tables rail bridge discussion for up to 6 months

SAM NELSON

Apr 15, 2021



Members of the Friends of the Rail Bridge are trying to save and preserve from demolition the Bismarck-Mandan Rail Bridge over the Missouri River between Bismarck and Mandan. The 1880s-era bridge was on the National Trust for Historic Preservation's list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places in 2019.

Mike McCleary

SAM NELSON

The Bismarck Park Board on Thursday tabled for up to six months a request from **T**railroad preservation group Friends of the Rail Bridge to join its public-private partnership, citing unknown financial responsibility.

The nonprofit presented to the park board at its meeting last month, but the board did not make a decision because two members were absent. Earlier this month, the Burleigh County Commission withdrew from a fledgling partnership with the Friends group because of liability and financial concerns.

Friends of the Rail Bridge wants to stop BNSF Railway from demolishing the 138-year-old Bismarck-Mandan Rail Bridge spanning the Missouri River to make way for a new structure. The preservation group and railroad signed an agreement with the U.S. Coast Guard in January outlining paths to either keeping or removing the bridge. The Coast Guard decides on projects proposed along that part of the Missouri River to “ensure the structure does not unreasonably affect navigation,” according to a Federal Register notice.

Friends of the Rail Bridge had until March 15 to establish a public-private partnership that would eventually take ownership of the historic bridge to prevent its demolition and convert it to a pedestrian bridge. The Burleigh County Commission voted on the last day to allow the group access to additional liability insurance through the North Dakota Insurance Reserve Fund.

But on April 5, members of the Friends nonprofit told the commission that they did not know that the Insurance Reserve Fund could not provide the group with insurance. They asked the commission to remain partners and said there would be no legal or financial commitment for another year. The commission voted to remove itself from the partnership.

Friends member Margie Zalk Enerson told the park board Thursday that the Coast Guard had given the nonprofit permission to move forward with its plans to preserve the bridge without a public partner. Coast Guard Chief of the Office of Bridge Programs Brian Dunn did not respond to requests for comment.

Park Board President Julie Jeske and other commissioners were hesitant to commit to Friends of the Rail Bridge. Jeske had several concerns, including regarding the potential to connect a trail from Bismarck to Mandan via the bridge without paths established on the west bank of the river. Enerson said the group is trying to understand "the obstacles, options and the solutions" involved.

Jeske responded that, "To me, there are major obstacles there, so this is a bridge that's going nowhere."

Several commissioners also said that while they personally wanted to see the bridge stay, there were too many unknowns, including the financial involvement.

"As a commissioner, I don't want to have the legacy of putting that burden on the next generation," Commissioner Wayne Munson said. "I want to save it, but I don't want the liability put on the park district two generations from now ... I don't want to say no, but I'm not ready to say yes."

Commissioners Mike Gilbertson and Andrew Jordan said they felt similarly.

BNSF Director of Bridge Maintenance Mike Herzog told the park board that preserving and converting the bridge is estimated to cost between \$60 million and \$90 million.

Enerson told the board that Friends of the Rail Bridge submitted proposed amendments to its agreement with BNSF and the Coast Guard to address "unprecedented" stipulations that the nonprofit foot a significant part the bill to save the bridge. The permit applicant for a new bridge, which is BNSF, typically pays for "mitigation efforts" in these cases, she said. Both the Coast Guard and the railroad have to agree to any amendments.

The board voted 4-1 to table the discussion, with Jeske voting against.

"You have a lot of convincing to do in six months time," she said. "Get to work."

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