

Groups Want to Use Old Aetnaville Bridge - News, Sports, Jobs - The Intelligencer / Wheeling News-Register

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Some may call the Aetnaville Bridge an eyesore. Others may dub it unusable. Ohio Valley Trail Partners President Doug Wayt and many other regional advocates see it as a "Gateway to the West."

Nearly 30 people representing several public and trail organizations met privately for a luncheon and site tour on Aug. 10 to discuss the future of the small passage from Wheeling Island to Ohio, which is a 110-year-old bridge that has been closed to vehicular traffic since December 1988 .

Wayt released the details of that meeting on Wednesday. He said officials agree, the West Virginia Division of Highways should reuse the bridge for a walking and biking trail incorporated into the Wheeling Heritage Trail instead of scrapping it.

He said 39 people signed in at the meeting. The individuals represented the WVDOH, OVTP, the city of Wheeling, the Wheeling Walkers and Runners Club, the West Virginia division of the National Park Service, Brooke Pioneer Trail Association, the Ohio County Commission, the Belmont County Commission, Monroe County residents, the Wheeling National Heritage Area Corporation, the Friends of Wheeling, the Wheeling-Ohio County Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Ohio Valley River Development Committee and the Bel-O-Mar Regional Council.

"The bridge is vitally important," Wayt said. "We're hoping the state will keep the bridge open for pedestrians and bicyclists."

The West Virginia Department of Transportation's main concern, however, is safety for even those who walk on it.

Dave Sada, WVDOH bridge engineer, said no improvements have been made to the bridge since its closure nearly 23 years ago. He added very temporary improvements were made to maintain pedestrian weight at the time of closure, but the I-beams, floor beams and connectors had all deteriorated in that time.

Opening the bridge for regular use would be "quite a lot of work," Sada said. "I couldn't imagine what it'd cost to revitalize."

He added \$122,000 would be needed just to inspect the bridge and analyze and engineer a construction process.

Wayt's counterpoint toward the safety issue was the bridge is much safer than attempting to use either the Fort Henry Bridge or the National Road bridge from Zane Street to Main Street in Bridgeport, due to heavy vehicular traffic and narrow shoulders on both.

Sada said the WVDOH would have ordered a demolition for May 2012, but there is a "school of thought" to wait "a few years" to see what trail officials can plan. While the decision will rest in the hands of the WVDOH's voting commission, Sada said chances for a demolition delay are "pretty good."

The ultimate goal for Wayt and the entire "Save the Aetnaville Bridge" group is to use the bridge to elaborate upon the master plan to connect Washington, D.C. to Wheeling, which is almost complete, except about seven miles in Brooke County and about a mile just west of Pittsburgh.

Wayt said just as Wheeling was named the "Gateway to the West" in the 1830s, the bridge would emphasize that historic significance by serving as the first passage to Ohio's trail systems.

