



Architecture & Engineering

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South Park Bridge: the city's worst bridge gets little attention

■ *The South Park Bridge got the worst score of any major bridge in the Seattle area, but a lot of people don't know it even exists.*

By JOHN C. RYAN
Journal Staff Reporter

What's the most earthquake-vulnerable bridge in Seattle?

Despite all the engineering studies, glossy brochures and press conferences on its behalf, it's not the Alaskan Way Viaduct.

The viaduct recently received a score of 9 out of 100 possible points on a Federal Highway Administration scale for structural sufficiency.

Open house

The South Park Bridge, a dual-leaf drawbridge crossing the Duwamish Waterway near the Seattle-Tukwila border, only got a 6, the worst score of any major bridge in the Seattle area.

King County will hold an open house on options for replacing the South Park Bridge tomorrow from 5 to 8 p.m. at Concord Elementary School, 723 S. Concord St., in Seattle.

The Fremont Bridge, currently undergoing a major seismic retrofit, got a 13.

The state Route 520 floating bridge, a poster child for the safety improvements that would be jeopardized if Initiative 912 passes, scored a 45.

"Nobody talks about the South Park Bridge," Seattle City Councilman Richard Conlin said last month at a press briefing held in the shadow of the viaduct.

"A lot of people don't know it even exists," said Charlie Cunniff of the Environmental Coalition of South Seattle.

"The viaduct has a 1 in 20 chance of major damage over the next 10 years," said King County Department of Transportation engineer Tim Lane. "(The South Park Bridge has) a 1 in 3 chance."

Lane said the bridge's most serious problem is the timber piles that support the northern side. They were not driven deep enough into the ground beneath the Duwamish River. But he said virtually every part of the bridge is seismically vulnerable.

Bridge piers have been slowly tilting for decades, and King County has done major structural repairs to keep the drawbridge opening and closing properly. Crews have added tendons and

other steel reinforcements to keep the bridge's halves from splaying. Almost every year, they have to shave the edges that meet when the bridge closes.

"One leaf is trying to move downriver, and the other is trying to move upriver," Lane said.

The South Park Bridge was not included in the controversial gas-tax package that would give \$2 billion to the viaduct and \$500 million to the SR 520 bridge. It also was dropped from the roster of projects that would be supported by a Regional Transportation Investment District tax.

The 1930 bridge carries 20,000 vehicles a day, about one-fifth the volume on the viaduct.

Now the county is considering replacing the South Park span entirely, at a cost of between \$70 million and \$90 million. Currently, the project has about \$10 million in funding from King County and \$3 million from Tukwila.

Rehabilitating the historic span is still an option, but the deterioration is so severe that most of its parts would have to be replaced. Rehabbing the bridge would also mean closing it for 2 to 3 years of construction, isolating the South Park neighborhood and flooding the First Avenue South bridge with traffic.

All four of the South Park Bridge's piers would have to be replaced, causing major disruption to contaminated sediments in the Duwamish Waterway and to threatened Puget Sound chinook salmon. The Duwamish Waterway is a Superfund hazardous-waste cleanup site.

A new bridge could have only two piers — meaning less disruptive mid-water construction than rehabilitation would require.

Cunniff said the South Park community is strongly opposed to replacing the low drawbridge with either a high-level or mid-level bridge. He favors building a new drawbridge just north of the existing span.

"The high-level bridge would essentially wipe out the downtown South Park business district, along with a number of houses," he said. "That's really not acceptable to the community."

He said a mid-level bridge would overtake fewer properties, but its modest height could limit development upriver from the bridge. A yacht manufacturer and two marinas sit upriver, and some riverfront industrial properties are "ripe for redevelopment," according to Cunniff.

"The specter of not knowing what's going to happen to the bridge is holding back the economic development of this neighborhood," he said. "There's a lot more potential, both residentially and commercially."