

## I-74 Bridge Comes to Critical Juncture

Written by

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Last month, the public got a peek at four finalists for the design of the Interstate 74 bridge over the Mississippi River, and it was an important milestone. For the first time, people could actually visualize what the new bridge might look like, eight years after it first became one the area's top transportation priorities.

People will disagree about which option is better, but all are potentially iconic, worthy of comparison to the beloved Centennial Bridge. Denise Bulat, executive director of the Bi-State Regional Commission, said all the designs have visual impact, for motorists and for people viewing them from afar. She noted that no matter which of the alternatives is chosen, it will be between 30 and 50 feet taller than the current bridge. Furthermore, she said, a pedestrian and bike trail is being designed to run alongside the bridge and is included in all the options. "I think it will be a tourism draw all in itself," Bulat said.

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The May 23 design preview acted as a local public midpoint of the process. A key federal regulatory decision is due next summer, and if the bridge passes that test, the project team will move on to final design, property acquisition, and - most importantly - securing nearly \$600 million in funding to actually *build* the bridge. Although tens of millions of dollars have already been spent on the project, that's no guarantee that the bridge will ever be built.

The bridge won't be finished for at least seven years, said Tamara Nicholson, project manager for I-74 Iowa-Illinois Corridor Study for the Iowa Department of Transportation. Yet the project is coming up on a critical time. The two agencies in charge of the project - the Iowa and Illinois departments of transportation - are working to finish an Environmental Impact Statement to submit to the Federal Highway Administration in spring 2007. That agency will then issue a Record of Decision, which is expected in summer 2007.

A Record of Decision carries with it no guarantee of funding, said Catherine Cutler, field-services coordinator for the Iowa Department of Transportation. "They're really looking more at our processes" than giving a stamp of approval to the project, she said. Nicholson said the Record of Decision deals only with "the location and a concept for the project."

The total project cost is estimated at \$675 million in today's dollars, Cutler said. (That does not include the \$12- to \$15-million cost of the pedestrian walkway.) The project will extend from Avenue of the Cities in Moline to 53rd Street in Davenport and would place the bridge east of the current I-74 river crossing.

Nicholson said that so far, the project has been funded at approximately \$86 million - mostly federal money with some state matching funds. That money will fully fund the preliminary design and the final Environmental Impact Statement, and will contribute significantly to both the final design and right-of-way acquisition.

Approximately 200 people attended the May 23 public meeting, Cutler said, and as of late last week the Iowa Department of Transportation had received roughly 75 comments on the bridge-design alternatives. The final decision on the basic bridge design rests with the state departments of transportation, Cutler said, and will be made in late summer or early fall. "It never was going to be a popularity contest," she said.

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Nevertheless, she said, people who've submitted comments favor two designs "pretty much neck and neck": the Basket Handle True Arch Twin Bridge (Scheme 1) and the Cable Stayed Single Bridge with Semi-Fan Stay Arrangement (Scheme 4). The other two schemes are variations on the first, although they're noticeably less elegant. (For more information on the bridge project, visit <http://www.i74corridorstudy.org> . To see the four bridge options, visit [http://projects.ch2m.com/I74Study/Assets/Finalist%20Bridge%20Type%20views\\_posters.pdf](http://projects.ch2m.com/I74Study/Assets/Finalist%20Bridge%20Type%20views_posters.pdf) .)

The formal public-comment period for the design alternatives closed June 6, Cutler said, but the agencies will still accept and consider them after that.



All four options are within 5 percent of each other in terms of construction and maintenance costs, Cutler said, and are roughly equivalent in terms of safety.

Once the Record of Decision comes back, Cutler said, the departments of transportation will begin the process of acquiring property for the new bridge. She said that displaced residents and businesses will be given fair-market value for their properties, along with relocation assistance to find a suitable equivalent property. If the parties cannot agree on a price, Cutler added, condemnation procedures will be used.

Businesses will not be compensated for any loss of business stemming from relocation, she said.

Decker Ploehn, Bettendorf's city administrator, said that his city has already set aside \$500,000 in its capital budget to help displaced businesses that want to stay in the central city. "Our hope is that we can offer some assistance to businesses that want to stay downtown," he said.

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According to the Nicholson, 22 residential structures, 37 businesses, and one church would need to be acquired for the preferred alignment of the bridge. (To see the preferred corridor alternative, go to [http://projects.ch2m.com/I74Study/Assets/2006\\_05\\_23\\_Meeting.pdf](http://projects.ch2m.com/I74Study/Assets/2006_05_23_Meeting.pdf) . Displaced residences and buildings are marked in blue.) The number of displaced properties has gone up by five since the the 2003 draft Environmental Impact Statement.

The family of Eric Trimble, president of Trimble, Incorporated, owns four businesses in downtown Moline, all of which will need to relocate if the bridge is built. He said that his family has begun scouting new locations for the businesses, but said it's premature to announce any plans or to start acquiring land. "It's still early in this process," he said.

He added that the departments of transportation have kept his family informed about developments in the project, but the situation is still uncertain. "Nobody knows anything yet," he said.

Overall, Bulat said, the departments of transportation have done a good job keeping the project on-track and including local stakeholders in the process. "They did a very thoughtful, methodical process," she said.

She added that the most important thing is to stick to established time targets, so that the new bridge isn't delayed unnecessarily. "We don't want those deadlines pushed back," she said.

Ploehn said the project already is a year behind where it should be at this point in the process. "The Record of Decision crept on us a little," he said.

Bulat acknowledged that construction - likely lasting at least three years - will be trying on many businesses and residents. "It's going to be a hassle, frankly," she said. But she noted that the plan calls for using the current bridge during construction, which should make it easier for everyone involved.

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Ploehn said he thinks the project team has effectively balanced cost and being considerate to residents. The impact, he said, "is not as small as possible, but as cost-effective as possible."

### Compiling a Citizen's Guide to the Interstate 74 Bridge Project

As part of its new Web site, the *River Cities' Reader* has installed a "Wiki" component, similar to what is used in the popular Wikipedia (<http://www.wikipedia.org>). To launch its Wiki, the *Reader* is inviting its readers to participate in citizen journalism.

The concept is simple. The *Reader* Wiki is publicly available at (<http://wiki.rcreader.com>). Any user can create and edit any page. In other words, *you* can expand upon or correct the work of others, or create your own articles on topics of interest to the Quad Cities community.

The mission of the Wiki site is "to empower citizens and their communities to use Web tools that foster understanding, discussion, and collaboration." A code of conduct is also available on the Web site.

We've started by creating a bare-bones article on the Interstate 74 bridge at ([http://wiki.rcreader.com/wiki/Interstate 74 Bridge](http://wiki.rcreader.com/wiki/Interstate_74_Bridge)). The goal is to work with the community to build a comprehensive, fair article on this important and complex topic.

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Although it takes some practice to get used to working with Wiki pages, they're largely self-explanatory. Each entry has an article tab, an edit tab (where you can change what's in the article tab), and a discussion tab. Play with it , and show us how you'd like to use this collaborative tool.