R.I.P. Lagunitas Road Bridge ca. 1908 – 2010

by Sandy Guldman
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Above is a view of the Lagunitas Bridge looking toward Ross Town Hall, invisible behind the clump of giant reed. Photo by Sandy Guldman

Although it is loved by many Ross residents, the Lagunitas Road Bridge has three strikes against it. First, the bridge constricts the flow of Corte Madera Creek, especially at high flows when debris accumulates on the bottom of the bridge. Second, its shallow foundations rest on soils that can liquefy in an earthquake. Finally, the bridge is at least 11 feet too narrow to meet current Caltrans design standards. Cumulatively, these problems led the Town of Ross to decide to replace the bridge, after years of regarding it as an untouchable historic feature. The work is scheduled to start in June 2010, so it should be underway by the time you read this.

The old bridge was built in 1908–1909, the same time period as four other bridges in Ross. Collectively they are considered a discontinuous historic district because of their innovative construction materials (reinforced concrete), their status as the first capital improvements in the Town of Ross, and their importance in the development of a local transportation system. It is no surprise that these are not the characteristics highly prized by today's residents, who cherish the charming electroliers (ornamental light supports) and railings.

The new bridge will have two 14-foot vehicle lanes and a pedestrian lane on the south side of the bridge, separated from traffic by a barrier. The railings will be similar in design to the original railings, and the electroliers will be replicas. A conscious effort has been made to correct the shortcomings of the bridge while replicating its decorative features.

We are eager to see the new bridge constructed to reduce the risk of flooding in Ross and, incidentally, providing the opportunity to remove a large clump of giant reed, an invasive non-native plant growing on the bank behind Ross Town Hall.

The design of the new bridge has more widely spaced abutments resting on firm substrate and a slightly higher deck, as well as no dangling utilities. It will be more seismically stable and will allow 5,400 cubic feet per second (cfs) of creek water to pass beneath it. This design goal was selected because studies of the concrete channel downstream have established 5,400 cfs as the maximum feasible capacity for the concrete flood control channel in Ross.

The US Army Corps of Engineers and Marin County are carrying out environmental review and design

work on proposed Corte Madera Creek Flood Control Project components in Ross and Kentfield. When the final project is designed, it will also convey 5,400 cfs. The current channel conveys only about 3,200 cfs, so when both projects are complete, they will reduce the risk of flooding in Ross, Kentfield, and Larkspur.

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