

THE NEW HARMONY GAZETTE - SPECIAL!

WHAT'S HAPPENING WITH THE BRIDGE?

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HERE'S THE TRUTH - NOTHING HAS CHANGED!

Recently, March 2024, a spin story was released by a member of the Harmony Way Bridge Authority which implied that the bridge would opening in the near future, possibly 2028. This, because the Authority just got word that they will receive another \$150,000 in government monies. The truth is, that'll not even cover the next bridge inspection. Nothing substantial has changed since the Gazette did the following story in 2023. READ ON:

It seemed to me that I must have written something regarding the Harmony Way Bridge sometime within the last year, but no, that was not the case. The last article in my archives appears to be from back in ancient 2021. Anyway, it's time! I've been getting questions around town on "What's Happening With The Bridge!"

I'd like to say that a lot has happened since 2021, or at least since the Bridge Authority was activated back in 2019, but I can't. It's going on four years, believe or not, since the Authority was started up, and the bridge is still pretty much in the same status. Closed!

After speaking, and emailing to at least five of the Bridge Authority Commissioners (one commissioner didn't respond to my email) on both sides of the Wabash River, what I discovered was that nothing new under the sun has taken place. The Bridge Authority is resolved to follow the same old plan, filing over and over and over to one federal grant fund; get turned down and file again. A little disappointing to say the least.

You see, there is nothing wrong with filing for the big federal dollars but that should not prevent them from also taking other steps, such as, lobbying and filing for state funds with both Indiana and Illinois. (They've received a total of only \$350,000 from state funds so far, and that was only from Indiana. Illinois has contributed nothing.) Also, they might consider filing for more than one federal grant at a time, or raising money privately with Authority Bond issues. There are many options that a Bridge Authority can opt for, besides just the federal grant approach.

Each time the Bridge Authority files for a one time federal grant in the Spring, they get turned down in the fall of that year and can't file again until the following year in the Spring, a one year turn over with each grant request. Time marches on!

When I initially spoke to Rod Clark, Indiana Bridge Authority Chairman, in February, he said to me that there was, "Nothing to report!", other than the fact that Bill Gillenwater had resigned and moved out of state, and that Gillenwater had been replaced by a woman from Mt. Vernon named Julie Vann. I later went back to Rod via email and got more detailed bridge data.

I also spoke to former Indiana Bridge Authority Secretary Ron Eimer and he couldn't say how much money the 2022 grant request amounted to that was recently turned down, or how much the next grant for 2023 could be for, but he did say that Julie Vann would be taking his place as

Secretary on the Indiana Authority, since he has resigned from that position, but is still a Commissioner.

I had also emailed Linda Henning, Secretary for the Illinois side of the Bridge Authority and was able to get the most recent “cursory” engineer’s report on the bridge.

Now, back to Indiana Bridge Authority Chairman Rod Clark and the email request that I made to him for Bridge financial information.

The current “cursory,” engineering study, done by Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc.(WJE) in 2020 cost the Authority \$148,341.84 of the \$350,000 total dollars they received from the state of Indiana in Economic Development Grant, taxpayer start-up money. A little bit under half of all the money that Rod Clark and his other nine Authority Commissioners have been able to raise since they took office in 2019. It’s so nice to see that the engineers are doing so well on this project!

What’s more astonishing is that after I perused all of the pictures and bridge inspection observations in the WJE report, over 22 pages, I found that they did not include even one estimate of what it would cost to get the bridge in open and running condition. The other historic reports that I have sitting on my desk from other Bridge Inspectors covering the years prior to 2020 all included detailed estimates as to what it would cost and how to actually get vehicles moving across the Wabash. Getting the next inspection report will cost more money, Rod says!

Rod Clark says that, “There will need to be additional engineering studies when and if the project moves forward.” Rod could not say how much these additional studies would cost and he went on to say, “I can not give you a cost estimate on that phase [two] other than to say that it will cost considerable more than the cursory study. That study has not occurred due to lack of funding.”

We sort of got that anyway!

Clark said that they, the Commissioners, specifically himself in 2023, applied to USDOT for funding for more studies and to rehabilitate the bridge. That filing deadline was February 28, 2023. I asked him what the next grant could amount to if awarded but he would not divulge that amount. He would only say that, “Grant proposals to the USDOT are considered in lock-down or confidential status during the process.”

I asked about other monies the Bridge Authority has been receiving and he said, “New Harmony Utilities pays the Bridge Authorities \$2,400 per year for access to the bridge for its gas line.”

This is an important point, since, if New Harmony had to resort to some other way to access their natural gas for our town it could cost the town millions of dollars. That means “YOU!” The bridge is vitally important to New Harmony! It’s not just about the flow of traffic.

Back to Bridge Authority Commissioner and Illinois Authority Secretary, Linda Henning! When I first emailed Linda on February 6th she sent me a canned response which she used with a local Illinois radio station. It was informative and covered a lot of old information which I had already written about in the past, something between 40 and 50 thousand words in the prior New

Harmony Gazette, but she didn't get to point that I was looking for. The press release made it clear, however, that Linda was still very much a "Believer" in the effort to reopen the Harmony Way Bridge, and I was very glad to hear her emphasize that.

Linda Henning points out that the official journey for the Bridge Authority started in February 2019 when president Donald Trump signed the Harmony Way Bridge Act abolishing the White County Bridge Commission and allowing the formation of the Illinois New Harmony River Bridge Authority and the Indiana Wabash River Bridge Authority. Linda went on to say, "We haven't given up!"

In our discussion, I indicated to Linda that, based on prior studies, the bridge would need a million or two to bring it up to operational status and then when the tolls get to where they are enough that they should establish a "Capital Improvement" account, above and beyond the annual maintenance expenses, to keep the bridge up and running. Linda replied that, it would take more than a million or two to make the bridge safe and operational "according to the engineering studies."

I stated to her that I didn't think a million or two was very far off according to earlier studies, to which she indicated, "...anything from the past is no longer relevant." And, "...\$2 million is a "spit in the Wabash. It will take more than that to get it back in shape!"

It's here that we sort of parted company. I asked her what she meant by, "There's so much more to consider than what was discussed in the past..." I asked her, "What specifically are you referring to? What more to consider? What specifically "from the past" is no longer relevant? What's no longer relevant?"

Her answer to me; "Too many questions to answer in a text. Ask Rod to share the engineering studies." I did ask Rod, as you know, and I'm still puzzled at Linda's reply, and the fact that the engineering study Rod sent does not answer the question about "How Much?" and doesn't get me any closer to an answer. So, if Rod's study doesn't say "How Much!" then where did Linda get her data?

The basic answers to the basic questions are not being answered by these Commissioners, even after four years! How much to get it up and running? And now the engineers are piling on one bridge study after another for hundreds of thousands of dollars. Where is the lobbying effort? Where are our elected officials on this? Why are the Authority Commissioners using the same engineering firm to do both inspections, and was this the deal (two inspections) when the Commissioners signed on with WJE?

Right now there are many more questions than there are answers, but if I'm reading the federal application rules correctly, the current 2023 Planning Grant could go as high as \$25,000,000 but probably far less. In 2022 the lowest Planning Grant was for around \$261,000, for a project out in Arizona. It is, as Rod informed me, a Planning Grant that they are applying for this time. Last year's Capital Grant went for something over \$17 million in Indiana. Before that the Capital Grant went to build a road between Dunes Park, up north, and Chicago. And before that one, the grant went to add an extra traffic lane on an Expressway running through Indianapolis. Get the picture?

Rod Clark says that the Bridge Authority made their first grant application in 2021, and that they made two grant applications in 2022, (all turned down) one was for a Capital Grant and one was for a Planning Grant. Clark adds, "If we had been awarded the Planning Grant, it would have provided funding, or at least we hope that it would have been sufficient, to complete the second phase of engineering studies necessary to move the project to "shovel-ready." (* Gazette Publisher note: Shovel Ready means that the construction contractors would have been able to submit their bids and the actual work could start when the bids are awarded.)

He went on, "If we had received the capital proposal, it would have provided sufficient funding to complete the second phase (*inspection) AND provide funding to complete the project, or at least we hope it would have provided sufficient funding."

We all know, of course, that none of the grant application proposals to date have been approved. Rod says that in 2022 there were 936 applications seeking funding and of those, 166 were funded. He also points out that in 2022, \$13 billion in requests and \$2.25 billion was awarded by USDOT.

These numbers just serve to reenforce my own contention that more has to be done in regard to approaching other funding sources and using other funding methods to get the bridge reopened.

It looks like getting federal grant money is a long shot, especially while the federal government is spending trillions on transfer payments, with none of that going for infrastructure improvements in our nation.

That's the state of things with the Harmony Way Bridge at this time - See you next month!