

Group questions new Jay bridge

LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, Aug. 6, 2004

JAY — Twenty local residents responded Monday to an urgent call from town historian Mary Wallace.

Wallace said she had become concerned in recent weeks about a new bridge and connecting road to be built on the West Branch of the Au Sable River in Jay, plans for which had been in the works since the late 1990s.

When constructed, the new, two-lane vehicular bridge will make it possible for the state Department of Transportation to remove a temporary, one-lane bridge put in place after Jay's historic covered bridge was lifted off its footings in June 1997. The 140-year-old covered bridge had been declared unsafe.

This year, a construction firm has been painstakingly reconstructing the wooden covered bridge, using the same design and building techniques employed by George M. Burt on the original in 1857, and re-using as much of the original material as possible.

The restored covered bridge, once back on its footings, will be available for use only by bicyclists and pedestrians.

But the Jay covered bridge cannot be hoisted into place over the Au Sable until the temporary bridge is removed — and the temporary bridge cannot be taken away until the new two-lane bridge is completed.

The site for the new bridge, 400 feet downstream from the covered-bridge site, was chosen on Feb. 7, 2000, by the Essex County Board of Supervisors after conflicts on the Jay Town Board made it impossible for the board to pick a site itself.

With the downstream site for the new bridge, DOT has planned a new access road connecting it to Route 9N, Jay's Main Street, on the west. Another new connector will pick up on the east side of the new bridge, cutting across pastureland to hook up with the Glen Road below the Ward Lumber mill and store.

The DOT's plans for the new-bridge project face only one more official hurdle: approval by the Adirondack Park Agency. The APA will consider the DOT's application next Thursday, Aug. 12, when commissioners meet at their Ray Brook headquarters. The meeting starts at 1 p.m.

THOSE ATTENDING Monday night's meeting at the Jay firehall came because of several concerns over the new Jay bridge project.

Wallace herself was concerned about a major construction project going through the site where Jay's iron forge operated through most of the 19th century. The forge closed in 1890, and no trace of it remains except a containment wall holding back the hillside to the east.

"What is going to happen to that containment wall?" Wallace asked Monday night. "And what about the monument?"

The monument to which she referred is a granite monument memorializing Burt's building of the covered bridge. Money for the monument was raised by the 4th-grade students at Keeseville Elementary School in 1997, and the stone was placed by a Jay Highway Department crew.

According to Chris Garrow, Jay's current highway superintendent, the memorial will stay exactly where it is, as will the nearby tennis courts. They will be part of a new park adjacent to the restored covered bridge.

Other concerns were about the two connecting roads to the new bridge, and the change their construction will work upon the existing landscape.

“We would like to see something more ‘Adirondack’,” Wallace said, “and less expensive.”

In 2000, project engineers estimated the cost of the new bridge and the connecting roads at between \$3.75 million and \$4.5 million.

According to Jay Supervisor Randy Douglas, the current estimate is \$6.92 million.

Others attending Monday night’s meeting were concerned about whether the construction project would disturb the wetland habitat of the Au Sable River banks near the site.

“Isn’t there going to be a lot of earth moving?” one resident asked rhetorically.

The most concerted opposition to the new-bridge project, however, had been organized by Peter Ciszewski and Marla Merante. The eastern connecting road will run through the pasture of the property they bought in February 2002, which they have turned into a horse farm.

Ciszewski and Merante say that the new road will make it impossible for them to operate their business.

They are also unhappy with the amount of money being offered by the DOT in compensation for taking part of their land by eminent domain for the new road.

Ciszewski said Monday that they have been offered \$30,000 by the state in compensation for the taking of 7.5 to 8 acres of their land.

According to the Essex County Clerk’s Office, Ciszewski and Merante paid a total of \$50,000 in February 2002 for their 68-acre property.

Ciszewski and Merante have larger complaints about the construction project, however, than the potential crippling of their business and the compensation for their property.

They have been circulating petitions for the last several weeks that characterize the new-bridge project as “elevated N.J. turnpikes in Jay, N.Y.” They say the bridge and new roads are simply out of character with the low-key, undeveloped, rural nature of this Adirondack community.

Frank Dubay, one of their neighbors, agrees.

“I’d rather have trees and pasture,” he said Monday, “than pavement and gravel.”

Highway Superintendent Chris Garrow, however, was concerned about the possibility of losing a two-lane bridge connecting the two halves of Jay hamlet.

“If this bridge is not approved next week, we’re not going to get a chance to find another site and develop another design,” Garrow said. “The feds are just going to pull the money and use it somewhere else — and we’ll be stuck with a temporary, one-lane bridge.”



Jay bridge chronology

1845 — An earlier covered bridge is built across the Au Sable River, connecting the hamlet of Jay on the west with the eastern farms.

Sept. 30, 1856 — The dam at St. Huberts, above Keene Valley on the Au Sable River, washes out. The resulting flood takes out every bridge in its path on its way to Lake Champlain except the new Arch Bridge in Keeseville and the Old State Road Bridge at Au Sable Chasm. Most of the old Jay bridge was washed out, but about 80 feet remained on the west bank.

April 26, 1857 — George M. Burt, of Au Sable Forks, is given the contract to build a new bridge in Jay hamlet, completing the span from the remaining portion of the old bridge across the Au Sable River to the east bank. Burt designs a 160-foot Howe truss, an engineering innovation less than two decades old, to cover the final stretch. Much of the work is finished that year, but the roofing is not completed until 1858. The bridge covers the river in a single span with no intermediate supports.

1953 — A lumber truck on its way from the main road, Route 9N, to the Ward Lumber mill on the Glen Road broke through the pre-1856 section on the west side of the bridge. The Essex County Highway Department removed that 80-foot stretch, replacing it with an earth-filled concrete approach and abutment. Three concrete piers and structural steel supports were also placed under the bridge at that time.

1969 — The bridge was further reinforced with four steel I-beams running the length of the span and a fourth concrete pier and steel support. The eastern stone abutment was also encased in concrete to prevent its decay.

1983 — The state Department of Transportation begins studying the Jay covered bridge because of its age, questions about its structural soundness, and problems caused by vehicle height limits imposed by the bridge's interior dimensions.

June 1997 — The Jay covered bridge is cut into three pieces and lifted off its footings over the Au Sable River. The pieces are rejoined, and it is placed on an adjacent vacant lot. A temporary, one-lane steel bridge is put in its place.

April 1998 — The Jay covered bridge is listed on the New York State Historic Register.

June 1998 — Syracuse University scientists begin studies of the bridge's wood to determine how much can be saved.

Feb. 7, 2000 — After Jay Supervisor Tom Douglas is sidelined by a heart attack, and the Jay Town Board splits 2-to-2 between an upstream and downstream site for the new bridge, the Essex County Board of Supervisors makes the decision. The county chooses a site 400 feet downstream from the covered-bridge site, rather than the alternative, 1,400 feet upstream.