



PO Box 5324, 1625 Fort Street (Station B)
Victoria, BC Canada V8R 6S4
info@johnsonstreetbridge.org

August 4, 2009

Mayor Dean Fortin and Victoria City Council
1 Centennial Square
Victoria, BC Canada
V8W 1P6

Re: Johnson Street Bridge Replacement

Dear Mayor and Council,

We are a group of Victoria residents and taxpayers who watch with alarm as the City of Victoria proceeds to replace the Johnson Street Bridge. We have serious concerns about this \$63-million project – more than double the cost of the \$28.1-million Save On Foods Memorial Centre – and believe the City has not made residents aware of all the project's implications. We want to advise you of our concerns, which we outline below, along with requests for information that we hope you or the City's staff will be able to provide.

1. Loss of a heritage asset. If the City destroys the existing bridge, it will remove the last remnant of Victoria's industrial heritage that remains visible from the Inner Harbour. This would be a mistake. As you know, the bridge was created by Joseph Baermann Strauss, one of the foremost bridge designers in North America. If this were a Frank Lloyd Wright building, the duty of the City would be to save it, not to replace it simply because it would be cheaper or more expedient to do so. Works of industrial architecture deserve the same respect, especially when so few remain here.

Other cities have managed to preserve similar bridges. Toronto, for example, identifies its Cherry Street Bridge – opened in 1931, and also designed by Strauss – as an architectural historical landmark, and lists it in the city's inventory of heritage properties. In 2007, Toronto noted that the bridge suffered significant corrosion, and successfully rehabilitated it for \$2.4 million, a tenth of the cost now cited for rehabilitating the Johnson Street Bridge.

Our bridge was last refurbished in 1999. At the time, the City's manager of transportation and development said the \$1-million upgrade would give the bridge several more decades of useful life (*Times Colonist*, April 3 1999, page B2). Now we are told it needs immediate repairs, or replacement. If the bridge has not been properly maintained, we want to know why.

2. Need to consider further alternatives to replacement. On April 23, the council gave approval-in-principle to replacing the Johnson Street Bridge, mainly because Delcan, the engineering firm hired to inspect the bridge, said it would cost \$25 million to refurbish the bridge and bring it up to seismic code. As we have noted, other cities have successfully refurbished similar bridges for far less. We want to know if the City will get a second opinion of the work required, and if not, why not. Furthermore, although we are sure that Delcan's assessment is objective, we want to know whether Delcan will be permitted to bid on the refurbishment or replacement work, which might raise the appearance of a conflict of interest.

Furthermore, we submit that refurbishing the bridge and bringing it up to seismic code are separate concerns. If the City wants to seismically upgrade its assets, it should consider all of them together, and set priorities. The Point Ellice Bridge, for example, carries a water main, a gas pipeline, and telephone and electrical cables. If the City is worried about earthquake readiness, securing that bridge should be a higher priority than the one on Johnson Street.

It seems the only options presented to the council have been to either completely refurbish and seismically upgrade the Johnson Street Bridge, or to demolish it. We submit that more options exist, including refurbishing the bridge and postponing the seismic work, creating a new cycling bridge, or even relocating the existing bridge and turning it into a pedestrian park like New York City's High Line (thehighline.org), a former elevated railway. We urge the City to consider all alternatives that would preserve the heritage of the existing bridge.

3. Urgency risks poor design. We are waiting, as you are, for news from the British Columbia government about whether two-thirds of the cost of a replacement bridge will come through the federal Infrastructure Stimulus Fund program. We are concerned that if these funds do come through, the included requirement to have the project finished by March 2011 will force the City to accept a mediocre bridge.

Several councillors have claimed that the City will build "the heritage of the future" with a new bridge, but this is unlikely if the City must rush to meet tight deadlines. As star architect Santiago Calatrava said recently, in regard to the stunning Peace Bridge he was commissioned to design for Calgary, "To build things with beauty is a matter of dignity and not a matter of time."

It appears from the schedule presented by the City's engineering department on May 21 that there will be no time for an open design competition. Instead, it seems designs will come through MMM Group, the engineering firm the City has hired to manage the bridge project. Judging by MMM's online portfolio, nearly all its bridges are extensions of concrete freeways. Although we are sure they are all well-built, none are visually inspiring.

We want to know if the City plans to hold an open design competition, and if not, why not. We want to know how the City will ensure that any new bridge is visually distinctive, and how the public will have any meaningful input into the final choice of design.

4. Urgency risks taxpayers' money. The City has not made it clear to taxpayers that they could be liable for the full cost of a replacement bridge – approximately \$900 per resident – if it is not finished by March 2011. The federal Infrastructure Stimulus Fund Guidelines state:

9) Expiration of Infrastructure Stimulus Fund

All projects are required to begin and materially end construction prior to March 31, 2011. Should this condition of funding not be met, Canada shall have the right to cancel funding in whole or in part, and further, *Canada shall have the right to be repaid any funding advanced, in whole or in part, for any project that is not completed by the end of the program.* [emphasis added]

It is quite possible that the City will not be able to satisfy these conditions. The number of contingencies in large infrastructure projects make it difficult for many to be completed on schedule – and in this case, there will be no room for the slightest delay.

We note that in other provinces where funding under the federal stimulus program has already been announced, nearly all the approved projects involve road maintenance, water/sewer system upgrades, public transit facilities, etc., that can realistically be finished by March 2011.

The total bill for this project, even if completed on time, may also be far higher than \$63 million. Cost overruns are common with large infrastructure projects: the final cost of the Confederation Bridge project overseen by MMM, for example, was 30% higher than originally forecast (CBC News, May 31 2007).

We want to know what steps the City will take to notify Victoria residents of all potential liabilities of the Johnson Street Bridge project. We also want to know how the City plans to guarantee and enforce completion of the project by March 2011.

5. Lack of public consultation. It appears that the City is determined to push ahead with bridge replacement, regardless of whether the federal and provincial governments award stimulus funds to the project or not. The mayor has said that it is too late to reconsider the council's approval-in-principle to replacement (*Victoria News*, July 15 2009, page 1) – even though no public hearing of this decision has taken place. This must be clarified. Is the City already duty-bound to construct a new bridge by its \$3.2-million agreement with MMM? We hereby formally request to see a copy of this contract.

We appreciate that the City has appointed a citizens' advisory committee for this project. All members of the committee are excellent people. However, we note that one is the development manager of a large residential project near the bridge that will benefit from the bridge's replacement, and at least one more is not a resident of the City of Victoria. All members of this committee should be able to objectively and fully assess the potential liabilities to ordinary City of Victoria taxpayers if this project proceeds.

6. Misdirection of civic priorities. This council was elected mainly to deal with homelessness and affordable housing. Instead, it appears that \$21 million to \$63 million of Victoria taxpayers' money, plus thousands of hours of staff time, will be diverted into a traffic-management scheme that will only save drivers and cyclists a few seconds as they cross the harbour.

Housing has not been included in the federal infrastructure program, but we are led to wonder if other opportunities have been lost by the City's commitment to bridge replacement. We note, for example, that in January the City of Victoria submitted a list of 27 "shovel-ready" infrastructure projects to the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. The Johnson Street Bridge was not on the list. Instead, the largest item was an \$80-million renovation of Centennial Square, which might have included a new library and downtown art gallery. That project, we submit, would have provided more long-term economic benefits than the one-time construction of a new bridge.

We know that you have difficult jobs, and we are grateful for your service to the city. However, we hope you also appreciate that the existing Johnson Street Bridge is a beloved part of Victoria, and that a \$63-million civic project should involve vigorous public debate. We hope to assist this debate through our website *johnsonstreetbridge.org*, by providing citizens with an independent source of information. We wish you good luck in your deliberations over this important project.

With kind regards,
JOHNSONSTREETBRIDGE.ORG

Ross Crockford, director

Yule Heibel, director

Victoria residents and non-resident property electors who support this letter:

[list of 17 names]