

# A matter of life and death

VIEW FROM THE KIRB/Kirby Lindsay  
01/24/2008

For those who work and live around the Aurora Bridge or drive or walk under it, a certain fear has developed.

"I used to love the view," Autumn Pulver said, "before I knew."

Her office at Impinj sits in the shadow cast by the impressive structure. Now she looks up at the bridge, sees someone pause along the railing and wonders, "What's that guy doing?"

Autumn is one of the Seattle **FRIENDS** (**FR**emont **I**ndividuals & **E**mloyees **N**onprofit to **D**ecrease **S**uicides) who hope to eliminate that fear and change some horrific numbers.

According to information at [www.seattlefriends.org](http://www.seattlefriends.org), seven people jumped from the bridge to their deaths in 2007. Additional information reports two people jumped and survived.

Next Wednesday, Jan. 30, in the B.F. Day Elementary School gymnasium, 3921 Linden Ave. N., the city will sponsor a public workshop to discuss a state Route 99-Aurora Bridge suicide-prevention fence.

## SAFETY IS MAIN PRIORITY

Fremont Chamber of Commerce (FCC) executive director Michael Jerrett has worked with Seattle FRIENDS since it started in spring 2007. "We are in favor of an economic and elegant solution to prevent suicides and keep people safe on the ground," states the FCC's official position on the Aurora tragedies.

Fremont Neighborhood Council (FNC) president Vafa Ghazi acknowledged his organization also supports FRIENDS' efforts to find a solution to prevent suicides from the bridge. Their letter of support for FRIENDS also states the FNC is "concerned that thorough consideration has not been given to the various options..." and over "the broad psychological and aesthetic impacts a physical (and visual) barrier will have."

"We support putting a barrier on the bridge," said Greg Phipps, a spokesperson with the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT). "Our first priority is safety."

State Rep. Mary Lou Dickerson (D-36th District) believes the barrier delivers a basic message of safety. With the increasing number of suicidal deaths, she said, something must be done, and "putting up a barrier would actually decrease suicide."



### [Photo Gallery](#)

■ Seattle FRIENDS vice president Autumn Pulver (left) and founder/president Ryan Thurston and Michael Jerrett, executive director of the Fremont Chamber of Commerce, have each seen people jump off the Aurora Bridge above. photo/Bradley Enghaus

It is no longer simply a matter of the safety of those who attempt suicide. As Jerrett stated, "It is not a matter of if but when," someone who jumps from the bridge will hurt or kill someone else. "The [suicide death] I witnessed a few months ago could have easily landed on someone at the construction site [below the bridge]."

The toll of these tragedies has increased, as the population beneath the bridge increases. Jerrett spoke from personal experience: "People are traumatized by it."

"It is only a matter of time," FRIENDS founder Ryan Thurston explained. He formed FRIENDS among his fellow employees at Impinj. Now, "we've grown to include the Youth Suicide Prevention Project, the Fremont Chamber and Rachel...."

High school senior Rachel Izzo heard of the nonprofit group's efforts to prevent suicides from the Aurora Bridge. After she lost a friend to mental illness and subsequent suicide, she wanted to do something. "This deals directly with the issue," she explained. "To be a part of this group helps me."

"No one talks about it," she said of her friend's death and the awkward silences left in the aftermath. "It is something that doesn't just go away if you don't talk about it." Thurston understands. "I have a friend who committed suicide," he explained. "Having gone through it, you know what others are going through."

## BARRIERS WORK

Impinj's Pulver acknowledged that a barrier - in combination with regular police patrols - "would slow [suicides] down." A barrier gives someone in distress a chance to reconsider, whereas jumping doesn't. "There is no way to stop once you've started," Izzo said.

The FRIENDS website has links to photos of bridges with barriers, many of which look an organic part of the original structure. Pulver hopes people give the designs a chance: "If the bridge were built today, it would have this."

WSDOT's Phipps explained, "Evidence supports that, done right, [barriers] work." A common misconception and concern is that a barrier will only move the problem elsewhere - a rational argument proven untrue in three case studies presented on the FRIENDS website. For instance, in Washington, D.C., two bridges stand one block apart. When a barrier was installed on one, the other saw no increase in suicide deaths.

The 75-year-old George Washington Memorial Bridge (the official name of the bridge) is owned by Washington state. Jodie Vice, legislative aide to Seattle City Councilmember Jan Drago, acknowledged the bridge as state property that exists within Seattle and affects its citizens directly.

"The [City] Council is interested in this project," she emphasized.

Other options have been discussed, but for now "the intent is to look at the barrier," Vice explained. That look includes examination of the historical nature of the bridge, a National Historic Landmark. Rep. Dickerson feels confident the city can facilitate a design that meets National Registry guidelines.

Izzo is blunt in her opinion: "Would you rather have a bridge from which people jump but looks pretty...?"

Thurston, on the other hand, is more pragmatic: "Bike helmets don't look good, but they keep us safe.... There is a safety aspect [to consider]. People under the bridge are in danger."

## AN OPEN PROCESS

WSDOT's Phipps explained that the state hasn't "started a design yet, but we have started a cost estimate." Without a design, the barrier construction is estimated at \$4.3 million. That price includes physical costs, traffic control, permits (including those needed to make changes to a historic structure) and design.

"For the [Fremont Neighborhood] Council, the main complaint that has been raised is that other options have not been given a chance to work," Ghazi explained. "The barrier would affect hundreds of thousands of people."

"We are trying to reach out to everyone we can," Vice said of the city's efforts to include concerned citizens in the planning through private interviews with stakeholders (including the FNC), a public workshop and mailings.

In mid-February, a design charette will take place among professional designers to solicit ideas. These will be exhibited at a public open house immediately afterward for review.

Ghazi voiced his concern: "It seems the public meeting is just about the barrier." Legislative aide Vice acknowledged, "We are not going to get into [other options]; we're not interested in opening that up. That is for WSDOT."

However, Vice encouraged, "Come to the workshop. We will clearly hear concerns in our process. We don't want to shut anyone out."

## CITIZEN ADVOCACY

FCC's Jerrett said, "I'm really encouraged by how fast everything has moved. The political support is huge. To see something go right and not have the usual Seattle analysis-paralysis take place, it's very encouraging thus far."

Rep. Dickerson has worked closely with FRIENDS "to make sure people hear their message and know the urgency." She sees the \$1.4 million pledged by Gov. Christine Gregoire as "quite an achievement." A vote on funding is expected during this short legislative session.

Legislative aide Vice credited timing for the speedy progress of this project. The city had money budgeted for it in 2008, she explained, but funds became available in 2007 to move studies and design planning up earlier than expected.

Dickerson gives credit to Thurston and his FRIENDS organization: "They are both tenacious and creative in their delivery of their message. I love to see citizen advocacy work this well. It is a great thing when it happens like this."

To join FRIENDS, sign up on its website ([www.seattlefriends.org](http://www.seattlefriends.org)), or check out its MySpace and Facebook pages.

Kirby Lindsay lives in Fremont, four blocks from the George Washington Memorial Bridge. She welcomes your comments at [fremont@oz.net](mailto:fremont@oz.net).