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Site of 230 deaths, the Aurora Bridge may get a barrier to prevent people from taking their own lives— thanks to workers and neighbors below. Ryan Thurston remembers the first fatality he witnessed from his office window. "I'd never seen death like that."... [full story](#)

Photo by Sherry Loeser

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Citizen pushes for Aurora Bridge barrier

Ryan Thurston looked out his window. What he witnessed led to a mission.

INTERVIEW BY ROSETTE ROYALE, STAFF REPORTER



Ryan Thurston had little idea the number of people who have jumped to their deaths from the Aurora Bridge — more than 230 since the bridge was built in 1932, with seven last year. He's pushing for a barrier, like other cities, to alter the bridge's history.

Photo by Sherry Loeser.

As far as views go, Ryan Thurston couldn't complain about what lay outside his third-floor office window: the Aurora Bridge, Lake Union, houseboats on the canal, the top of Gasworks Park. All of it, right there, before his eyes.

Then one morning, in September 2005, he noticed his fellow coworkers flocking to the window, staring to the ground below. Thurston, an employee with a tech company that had only been subleasing space in the Adobe building for two months, had been checking his email. Drawn by the chatter and commotion, he too approached the glass, eyes gazing down to the parking lot on the building's east side. What he saw didn't compute: There was a body. A man. Lying face down. And blood.

At first, he thought: The man must have tripped. Then Thurston looked up at the Aurora Bridge. A car, its door ajar, sat parked near the rail. Pedestrians on the bridge's sidewalk pointed to the body more than 130 ft. below. Down on N. 34th St., adjacent to the parking lot, a group of people gathered, disbelief frozen on their faces. Eventually, security from Adobe covered the body with a tarp.

"It was surreal," Thurston, 31, recalls. Shock seized his mind. Panic followed. Then, denial: It's not possible. No one would have done that. "But then it was right there before you," he says. "I'd never seen death like that."

And surely, he reasoned, he never would again. After all, what had occurred had to be an isolated incident.

Though reality trumped reason when it happened again. And again and again. "It was eye opening," he says.

Not to mention catalyzing. Because by early 2006, the deaths, and their affect upon co-workers and community members, led Thurston to found Seattle FRIENDS (Fremont Individuals & Employees Nonprofit to Decrease Suicides). Its mission: to eliminate suicides from the Aurora Bridge.

But how do you alter the troubled history of a bridge that, since its completion in 1932, has been the jumping-off point for more than 230 people who have committed suicide?

Thurston's first step was to gather support from neighbors and numerous legislators, including State Senator Ed Murray (D - Seattle) and City Councilperson Jan Drago. That summer, with their backing, he approached the Washington Department of Transportation (WSDOT), which owns and handles long-term maintenance of the bridge. After considering a number of options, such as closing the sidewalks or even attaching walkways under the bridge, WSDOT opted for a barrier.

Andrea Burgess, project manager for the barrier, says, to her knowledge, there had been no movement to place a barrier on the bridge before. "It's a unique project for WSDOT to do," says Burgess.

Unique in scope, yes, but not in purpose. Several years back, Renton police approached WSDOT about a small bridge along Route 167, on the border of Renton and Kent, that had experienced a number of suicide attempts and fatalities. After a fence was built, suicide became a non-issue.

But a barrier on the Aurora Bridge would prove far trickier. The structure will need to run along both sides of the almost 3,000 ft. bridge. Its weight load can't compromise the bridge's structural integrity. To address the latter issue, Burgess says the department's most recent plans incorporate lightweight steel cables.

To be aligned vertically and placed closely together, the cables would be set into a frame attached to the outboard side of the rail. The cables, rising like the teeth of an oversized comb, would stretch to a height surpassing 8.5 ft. An architectural feature to encase the cable's tops ends — Should a hollow, polished steel tube running the bridge's length hid the termini of the cables? Would an overhanging cover prove more esthetic? Will either design hamper someone's attempts to clamber over the cables? — is still being envisioned.

With the bridge — officially known as the George Washington Memorial Bridge — listed as a national historic landmark, the barrier must also gain the approval of the local Landmarks Preservation Board.

And then there's the cost: WSDOT estimates a barrier will land somewhere in the neighborhood of \$7.5 million. Last year, the state legislature approved a fifth of that total — \$1.5 million — for the design phase, which is currently underway. WSDOT will ask for the remainder as part of a transportation package for next year's budget.

Though when it comes to financial matters, these are belt-tightening times, for citizens and governments both. Just last week, the Seattle Times reported that the state could face a \$3.2 billion deficit in the next budget.

Burgess, conceding that taut purse strings could delay the project, says the department plans to keep pace with its present timeline. "It's hard to have a crystal ball and look into the future," she says.

The projected timeline may find

WSDOT presenting a functional design to the Landmarks Preservation Board this November. If funding and landmark approval come into alignment, barrier construction could begin in spring 2010. Three months after that, the barrier could be complete.

But before any of those dates see the dawn, the design has to pass the muster of an advisory committee. Ellen Monrad, chair of the Queen Anne Community Council, sits on that committee, along with Thurston and Burgess. With the southern end of the bridge anchored in Queen Anne, she felt it necessary to share her constituents' views, many of which, while expressing sympathy for suicide victims and families, focus on the view. "When they put up a barrier," she worries, "that will block the view." One of the last great vistas in Seattle, Monrad says she's on the committee to ensure it isn't destroyed.

But the committee process. Monrad finds it maddening. "The process is bureaucracy at its best," she says. "And I don't mean that in a good way."

Take the barrier's proposed cables: She says the committee was never asked whether or not it wanted them. And she wonders why money matters don't play more of a role in deciding how to construct the barrier. And then there's this: Will a barrier even work? "There's no guarantee that there won't be more jumpers," Monrad says.

At a Sept. 9 meeting, committee members indeed referred to the barrier as a deterrent, not a solution. People in other cities might disagree.

In Washington, D.C., those considering suicide would sometimes seek out the Duke Ellington Bridge, forgoing another structure, the Taft Bridge, several blocks away. After a barrier was placed on the Duke Ellington, suicides from the bridge ceased. Fears that jumps would increase on the Taft proved unfounded. Jumpers have ignored that bridge.

The Bloor St. Viaduct in Toronto, Ontario, had seen more than 400 suicides from its ledges. After a barrier — known as the Luminous Veil, due to its construction of steel rods and girders — saw completion in 2003, suicides from the bridge halted. None have been reported since.

But while Toronto's Luminous Veil was finished in 2003, the drive to place a barrier on that bridge began nearly six years earlier, in 1997. Thurston's effort for a local barrier only has two and a half years behind it.

Having never been on a committee before, Thurston admits that while the process may move slowly, at least it's moving. Besides, monthly committee meetings allow the community to add their voices to the design phase, he says. Few have.

After three monthly meetings, not even 30 people and/or groups have contributed their opinions, even though an estimated 40,000 commuters use the bridge daily. The comments range from wondering if an obese person, leaning against the cables, would cause them to snap, to disbelief that WSDOT is wasting money considering the project when guns prove far deadlier, to outright support.

Thurston knows that when — if — the barrier gets built, some may oppose it for being unsightly. Others, who don't live or work near the Aurora Bridge, may not understand the need.

Even Thurston concedes that, at one time, he didn't think too much about a barrier. "I was always kind of ambivalent," Thurston admits, his thoughts returning to the first person he saw outside his window. "And then I realized: This man has family and has friends. That's when you realize something has to be done."

<Join in>

The Aurora Bridge barrier advisory committee has two more meetings left, on Tues., Sept. 30 and Tues., Oct. 21. Both meetings will be held at Seattle Pacific University, Otto Miller Hall, Rm. 109, 3469 Third Ave. W., 6-8 p.m. [Map](#)
(Public comments are usually reserved for the last 20 mins.)

To see a project overview online, and download a design workbook, visit: <http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/Projects/SR99/AuroraBridgeFence/Default.htm>