

In Seattle, a suicide barrier for a deadly bridge

The Aurora Bridge is one of the most jumped-off bridges in the U.S. Half of it runs over land -- creating a particularly horrifying danger for pedestrians.

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Reporting from Seattle — The lonely heights of bridges have often been magnets for suicide -- San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, the Clifton Suspension Bridge in Bristol, England, the Coronado Bridge in San Diego. The lure of a spectacular plunge to a speedy demise in a womb of water has proven irresistible for generations.

In few of these places, though, are despairing jumpers in danger of becoming deadly missiles, threatening pedestrians below. That dubious honor is reserved for Seattle, where the 78-year-old Aurora Bridge runs 167 feet above the west end of Lake Union -- half of it over land.

It is the second- or third-most-jumped-off bridge in the U.S., behind the Golden Gate (and by some estimates the Coronado), and its overland portion looms above the neighborhood of Fremont, which for decades has lived with the unsettling possibility that a body could come hurtling past at any moment.

Software developer Adobe Systems' Seattle offices are near the line of fire. So are several other technology companies, a neighborhood community center, shops and apartments.

"I had a window office, and that's when I noticed the first suicide," Ryan Thurston, a senior design engineer for a nearby semiconductor company, said of an incident a little more than four years ago when a body sailed from the railing down to the parking lot.

"It was a man, probably in his mid-40s. We saw him lying face-down on the ground with what appeared to be blood coming from underneath his body. And when we looked up, we could see his truck with the car door open," Thurston said. "It was a pretty traumatic experience."

But it became, bizarrely, almost routine. "We saw dozens after that," Thurston said.

Thus began a campaign launched by Thurston, several fellow Fremont residents and suicide prevention specialists to end the Aurora Bridge's reign of terror. More than 230 people have jumped from it to their deaths (a shoe salesman leaped from the span before it even opened in 1932). Nearly 50 have died since 1995 alone, and more than half of them landed not in the water, but in Fremont.

Next month, after years of discussion and efforts to find the money, Seattle will begin construction of a high barrier on both sides of the bridge designed to prevent people from hoisting themselves over the side. It is scheduled to be finished next fall.

Similar suicide barriers have been successfully put in place on spans such as the Duke Ellington Bridge in Washington, D.C., the Prince Edward Viaduct in Toronto and the Arroyo Seco Bridge in Pasadena.

Administrators at the Golden Gate are looking at installing a \$50-million net, though much of the cost may have to be picked up by private donations. At the Cold Spring bridge in Santa Barbara, where eight people died last year, local officials are zeroing in on a suicide barrier plan that will pass aesthetic muster.

Similar delays have dogged efforts here in Seattle, where emergency call boxes and signs with a suicide hotline number were installed on the bridge in 2006 as a halfway measure.

First there was talk of simply banning pedestrian traffic from the bridge, but that ran into vehement opposition in a city that prides itself on its official preference for walking and biking over driving.

There was talk of going whole hog and constructing a caged pedestrian walkway below the roadway, but that sent cost estimates rocketing toward \$50 million, an amount all agreed wasn't in the cards.

Then aesthetic issues came into play, since the Aurora Bridge -- officially named the George Washington Memorial Bridge (as it was dedicated on the first president's birthday) -- is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is an official Seattle landmark.

Historical groups signed on to the barrier plan, though, with the proviso that the new fence -- now designed as a series of thin, closely spaced vertical posts 8 feet, 9 inches high -- make no attempt to imitate the original architecture of the bridge.

"The guidance we got from them was to do something that was as transparent as possible, and not be what they called 'falsely historic,' " said Greg Phipps, spokesman for the Washington Department of Transportation. "It's a very simple, classy design. It's not ornamental in any way, and ultimately the purpose of the fence is to deter suicides."

All the years of debate produced one bonus. Thanks to the economic downturn that occurred after the approved budget of \$8.1 million, contractors are working cheaper, and it will now cost only about \$4.6 million.

Through it all, Fremont residents argued the bridge needed fixing not only on behalf of the people on top, but the hapless bystanders below -- it being only a matter of time, they argued, before someone was hit.

For some of the high-tech engineers whose cubicles overlook the base of the bridge, it seems almost a mathematical probability.

Thurston, who recently started a graduate program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, recalled an incident that occurred right in the middle of rush-hour traffic.

"The guy had jumped and landed right in the middle of 34th Street," he said. "There must have been 30 or 40 people, motorcyclists, bicyclists, pedestrians that had witnessed it."

There was no option, he and some of his neighbors decided. It had to stop.

"There have been a couple of people who have sent hate e-mails. It usually boils down to, why are we spending millions of dollars during a recession to suicide-proof a bridge? Or, are you going to suicide-proof everything?" Thurston said.

No, he says. Just this bridge.

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