

Bayonne Bridge option unveiled

Raising the height will not destroy homes

by Al Sullivan

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When 1st Ward Councilwoman Agnes Gillespie heard the news that the Port Authority wants to raise the Bayonne Bridge by 165 feet to let ships through, she nearly jumped that high for joy.

“I’m absolutely elated,” she said, grinning from ear to ear.

The Port Authority issued a long anticipated report just before the end of the year announcing that they preferred this option. Raising the bridge will allow new, larger container-carrying ships – due to arrive on the East Coast in 2014 – to pass into the ports at Newark and Elizabeth along the western shore of Newark Bay. The ships are expected to arrive due to the widening of the Panama Canal.

In announcing their preference, the Port Authority said they will not have to remove homes due to the change.

“I’m absolutely elated.” – 1st Ward Councilwoman Agnes Gillespie

That was good news for Gillespie personally, as well as for the 1st Ward she represents. The biggest impact would have been in her area, and it could have impacted her family who lives in the district.

Last year, the Port Authority established a committee to determine the best alternative for dealing with the issue. At stake was the possible loss of billions of dollars in revenue to the area because the new ships would not be able to fit under the Bayonne Bridge.

The bridge needs to be raised from its current 151-foot clearance to about 215 feet.

But raising the bridge could have meant longer ramps to accommodate the new height, and accommodating the ramps would have caused residential homes in the 1st Ward to be demolished.

“I don’t know how they intend to raise the bridge without taking homes,” Gillespie said. “I’m just glad the homes are being spared.”

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Lifting the roadway

The details of the project are yet to be announced, but a Port Authority release said the "Raise the Roadway" solution will involve reconstruction of the existing approaches, ramps, and main span roadway to a higher elevation that will allow the crossing to accommodate larger ships for years to come.

This modification approach also minimizes visual and physical impacts to the historic bridge, and seeks to preserve the iconic arch. The 78-year-old bridge was designated a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark by the American Society of Civil Engineers in 1985 for its innovative structure and design.

Mayor Mark Smith said the Port Authority intends to raise the roadbed in place, using the existing steel-arch span.

Smith said the construction will create thousands of highly skilled union jobs at a time when the region needs them most, and also helps maintain the regional port as a premier port.

"The sooner we get this job begun and done, the better able we will be to preserve and expand the tens of thousands of port-related jobs and industries throughout the region," Smith said. "I am grateful that the Authority heard my concerns about our Bayonne neighborhoods and has selected an alternative that does not require the condemnation of any Bayonne homes."

Developing the details

The Port Authority said its staff is working on the engineering issues that will make this plan possible, including roadway design, lane configuration, and upgrades to the existing 10-foot-wide lanes that will provide median dividers and shoulders. Additional safety and security measures will also be added. The Port Authority will work with its regional partners to initiate and expedite the environmental regulatory process.

"This is an important next step to developing a cost-effective solution to address the Bayonne Bridge navigational issues," Port Authority Executive Director Chris Ward said.

The issue was looming over the bridge for several years. The Port Authority's Board of Commissioners moved to expedite the project in June by agreeing to retain nationally known consulting teams to provide technical information on environmental and regulatory issues related to the project, as well as committing to announcing a preferred alternative by the end of the year. The Port Authority's consulting teams have worked to develop approaches to expedite the environmental review process, including the National Environmental Policy Act requirements, and other applicable regulations.

In October, the board agreed to provide up to \$1 billion in its capital planning process to help finance a Bayonne Bridge solution.

New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie has made the Bayonne Bridge project one of his top priorities, given its critical role in allowing ship traffic to get to terminals in the Port of New York and New Jersey.

The port currently supports approximately 269,000 jobs in the New York and New Jersey region, and provides for \$11.2 billion in personal income; \$36.1 billion in business income; and \$5 billion in local, state, and federal tax revenues.

In 2009, the port handled 4.6 million loaded and unloaded 20-foot equivalent units (TEUs). The dollar value of all cargo handled was more than \$146 billion.

Timetable

Rep. Albio Sires said the bridge is expected to be completed within a three to five year expedited timetable.

“The Bayonne Bridge has been a major priority of mine, and I have advocated for the raising of the bridge to help save over 250,000 jobs,” Sires said.

The decision to raise the bridge also won praise from unions.

“Our ports are one of the strongest economic engines for the state and the region, and we are proud to see the Port Authority today take one more step forward in ensuring the next generation of large cargo ships has access to these ports, and that the height of the Bayonne Bridge will soon no longer be an impediment,” said New Jersey State AFL-CIO President Charles Wowkanech.