

Fambro talks prevention measures at Gorge Bridge

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The death of a local teenager who jumped from the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge last week has raised the issue of viable prevention measures at the site that could help save lives.

Jim Fambro, Taos County commissioner and former Taos Volunteer Fire Department chief, has advocated for decades for structural changes to the bridge to help prevent deaths. He worked for more than 30 years with the fire department and has experienced multiple retrieval operations firsthand — bringing bodies up from the gorge.

“Out of dignity to the family left behind, that is a necessity – to retrieve the remains,” Fambro said.

Retrieving remains is dangerous work, and prevention measures could not only help deter suicides, but Fambro says it would in turn reduce risks to emergency personnel during search-and-rescue and retrieval efforts. He supports raising the bridge rails by at least 4 feet. He acknowledges that people might still be able to find a way to jump, but that a higher railing would help deter them from doing so.

“It’s too damned easy [for people to jump], and nobody wants to do anything about it and it’s frustrating,” Fambro said. “I have gone through two multiple-term governors that won’t even touch this — Gov. Richardson and [Gov.] Martinez,” he said.

As a county commissioner, Fambro said he is powerless because the bridge is part of the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument. He said the Department of Transportation is “more interested in aesthetics” and that the state is interested in maintaining the quality of the view for the movie industry.

“Everybody else, they’ve done something about it,” Fambro said, referring to sites such as the San Diego-Coronado Bridge, San Francisco Golden Gate Bridge and the Royal Gorge Bridge near Cañon City, Colorado.

“All they have got to do is raise their railing,” said Fambro. “I will bet everything that if the bridge was higher and if somebody had to struggle to get over the railing, then most of these [jumps] wouldn’t happen.”

He said while some bridges use a barrier, such as a net, underneath, he thinks higher railings are the answer for the Gorge Bridge because a net would cause more of a problem for emergency crews in retrieval efforts.

Fambro expressed frustration that while some interstate bridges have prevention measures, like chain link fences and other devices, the Gorge Bridge doesn’t.

“Because somebody jumped off one of those bridges into traffic, now all of those bridges have some kind of chain link [barrier] preventing people from jumping over,” he said. “You will

find those devices over the interstate, but we can't do that here. We have dozens of suicides, and nobody will do anything."

Fambro said he acknowledges the arguments against making changes to the bridge. He's heard them all, he said, including that if a person is determined to jump, it doesn't matter — they'll find another way to end their life.

He added that mental health services and the lack of "wraparound family services" in the Taos community is an ongoing issue that needs more attention.

"If we gave them a second thought, maybe something could be done to change their mind and their loved ones wouldn't have to go through this," he said. "Maybe if we get them treatment, then they don't need that sure thing. Maybe they want to continue to fight and live. Maybe someday in my life, that bridge will be jumper safe, and if we prevent just one person, it will be worth it."



Fambro is a county commissioner and was previously the Taos Volunteer Fire Department chief.

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