

Suicide deterrents at Rio Grande Gorge Bridge gain momentum

By Laurie Celine, lceline@taosnews.com

The Taos News, 8/18/2016

Experts say it's often an impulsive moment for those who commit suicide – or attempt to do so – by jumping off a bridge. So it follows that many of those involved in prevention efforts, locally and across the country, are in favor of more physical deterrents and expanded crisis hotline options at bridges where individuals jump to their deaths.

The issue is again on the minds of those in Taos County. Despite its stark beauty and the fact that it's a continuous draw for tourists, the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge, located about 10 miles northwest of Taos, is also known among many in suicide prevention as a “suicide bridge.” Two of the latest incidents involved a 14-year-old Taos-area male and a 31-year-old Colorado Springs man. The Gorge Bridge sees about two suicides a year on average, based on reporting from *The Taos News* and its archives. Official numbers have been requested by the New Mexico Office of the Medical Investigator (OMI).

Steve Mongeau is the executive director of Boston-based gorgebridgesafetynetwork.org New Mexico Crisis and Access Line: (855) 662-7474 Text “GO” to 741741 if you're feeling in crisis and want to communicate.



Seen below the bridge railing is a rendering of a proposed “netting” intended to be a suicide safety measure and deterrent for would-be jumpers off the Golden Gate Bridge. Many in Taos hope something similar can be done here.

Photo courtesy Golden Gate Bridge Highway and Transportation District

Samaritans USA, a coalition of eight community-based suicide prevention centers in the U.S. The group helps communities secure funding for so-called “suicide barriers” at bridges, like higher railings or netting.

“Those who have [survived jumping] will tell you that they didn’t really want to die — they just thought it was the way to remove themselves from the pain and the burden they thought they were causing those that they care about,” Mongeau said.

Preventive measures

Mongeau said barriers and crisis hotline boxes at bridges work.

Other bridges that have drawn jumpers — and have successfully installed deterrents — include San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge, the Sagamore and Bourne bridges that cross over the Cape Cod Canal in Massachusetts and the Royal Gorge Bridge in Canon City, Colorado. There are others.

Mongeau said the Tobin Bridge in Boston is the most used bridge site for suicide jumpers in Massachusetts, with about four to six suicides a year. It recently had braided fencing installed, funded by the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, he said. Mongeau said that before barrier fencing was installed in the early 2000s on the Sagamore and Bourne bridges, suicides averaged about three per year. After the fencing was put in place, the number dropped to two suicide deaths a year from 2002 to 2012, he said.

NMDOT strategy

In the case of the Gorge Bridge, the New Mexico Department of Transportation (NMDOT) recently conducted a feasibility study looking at the logistics of higher fencing, netting or more security to deter jumpers. The Gorge Bridge is a state of New Mexico bridge, located on a state highway. Therefore, it falls under the purview of NMDOT.

Officials say the biggest issue for installing new deterrents is money.

“We take this issue very seriously, and we’re going to continue working with law enforcement and the public to find ways to prevent [suicides at the Gorge Bridge] from happening,” said Emilee Cantrell, public information officer at NMDOT. “It’s also important to note that last year, we installed 10 call boxes on the bridge that connect directly to the New Mexico Crisis and Access Line (NMCAL), which is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week.”

The 10 emergency boxes at the Gorge Bridge have signage that says, “There is hope. Make the call.” A push of a red button connects the caller to a counselor. There were 565 calls placed from Jan. 1, 2016, through Aug. 2, 2016, according to Wendy Linebrink- Allison, program manager of the NMCAL. She said two of those callers told counselors they had the intent to jump. Sheriff’s deputies were able to arrive in those two cases and ensure their safety, Linebrink-Allison said. She said calls are answered within 12 seconds of the push of the button and that there is never a busy signal. However, many of the calls come, for example, from kids playing and pressing the red button, she added, or are calls that are not considered emergencies.

Funding for other deterrents at the Gorge Bridge has been a more complicated issue.

Close to home

Taos resident Margaret “Curly” O’Connor watched her 23-year-old son, Cooper Beacom, leap from the Gorge Bridge in 2014 as she tried to talk him out of it.

Shortly after Beacom’s death, she formed the Gorge Bridge Safety Network, which focuses on suicide prevention. O’Connor held a meeting Aug. 2, following the recent deaths at the Gorge Bridge, to rally the community anew and pressure state lawmakers to push legislation to fund suicide prevention barriers at the bridge.

“As a community, we have to get behind the Gorge Bridge, making it a safer, more beautiful place. We are getting a package together that we can present to the community and other organizations,” O’Connor said.

Legislative solutions

NMDOT Cabinet Secretary Tom Church has previously told O’Connor that the issue is a multiyear one. He has said the NMDOT would either need to put current projects on hold, use funding already in the state budget – or legislators would need to appropriate separate funding for the DOT to get a physical barrier built.

Sen. Carlos Cisneros, D-Questa, said he’s been trying to get a suicide barrier at the Gorge Bridge for years. “The answer from the highway department is that the cost is prohibitive. It would cost about \$7 million — and that’s not the only problem. The weight [of additional infrastructure] would exceed the weight limit on the bridge,” he said. “You have got to find material that is lightweight and that will traverse from one end to another.”

Cisneros said he has not checked to see if any federal funds are available — since the Gorge Bridge spans a national monument, the Rio Grande del Norte. But he said he’ll be sending a letter New Mexico’s federal representatives “to see if they can assist at that level.”

“In the meantime, hopefully we can get someone stationed there, if nothing else [than] to divert people from loitering or [being] around the bridge after hours,” he said.

Samaritans USA success

Samaritans USA helped secure funding for physical barriers on the Sagamore Bridge in the 1970s. Mongeau said the funding came together when the community approached legislators to appropriate funds for the project.

High railings now line the bridge, and those who cross it would have a difficult time missing the large emergency boxes with signs that state, “Feeling desperate, lonely, suicidal? Call the Samaritans.” The Sagamore Bridge also has a texting service. Some say the Gorge Bridge boxes need a texting option and larger signage.

“The younger [ages] reach out by texts,” Mongeau said, adding that more than 98 percent of youth callers at the Sagamore Bridge reach out through text messages.



Another view and rendering of a proposed suicide safety and prevention “netting” at the Golden Gate Bridge.

Photo courtesy Golden Gate Highway and Transportation District



Steve Mongeau is the executive director of Boston-based Samaritans USA, a coalition of eight community-based suicide prevention centers in the U.S.

Courtesy Steve Mongeau

Copyright (c)2016 The Taos News 8/18/2016

Powered by TECNAVIA