

Calls for safety at Rio Grande Gorge Bridge revive old planning debates

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The Taos News, 8/10/2017

The Rio Grande Gorge Bridge on U.S. 64 is a happening place any day during the height of summer.

Local artists and rock hounds are talking up tourists and selling horsehair pottery, jewelry, fossils, sage sticks and cholla crosses. People walk up and down the rocky hillside between the Bureau of Land Management public restrooms and the bridge itself. There are dogs aplenty, elderly people and kids of all ages, all of them crisscrossing the road to get the perfect view and family photo.

But there's also traffic – tourists and locals trying to get home, big rigs and construction trucks heavy with gravel. Even before a 74-year-old tourist was struck by a vehicle near the bridge Saturday (Aug. 5), the calls for a safer, pedestrian-friendly bridge flared up again. Just days before the hit-and-run a group of local safety advocates submitted to the state a proposal that would upgrade the infrastructure on the bridge and the unimproved footpaths and roadsides to the west of it.

The aim is to make it safer for everyone.

The plan, submitted Aug. 2 by the Gorge Bridge Safety Network and Taos County, is based on research conducted by the group over the past year and includes input from stakeholders, such as the Bureau of Land Management, which oversees the monument, and tribal representatives.

The 11-point plan highlights the “immediate need for safety measures” at the bridge. It calls for installing new barrier rails at least 8 feet tall and a traffic barrier between the driving and walking lanes, widening the pedestrian walkways, painting designated crosswalks and lowering the speed limit.

In the area west of the bridge, the proposal suggests barriers along both sides of the road to prevent parking within 300 feet of the bridge, a stairway between the rest area and the sidewalk and more wheelchair accessibility.

Furthermore, it suggests developing a designated area for up to 30 vendors.

The improvements could cost upward of \$3.2 million, according to the plan that will be formally presented to the state transportation department in September.

The network's proposal is similar to some that have been floated in the past.

Vendors used to sell their wares on the east side of the bridge. The state's transportation department blocked that space off in 2011. It was just one episode in a long saga involving vendors and their association, tribal, state and local governments, as well as law enforcement. Though the east side of the bridge is arguably safer – flatter, clear of trees, more spacious – vendors naturally migrated to the other side, where they now set up along the roadside, mostly to the north.

Efforts to improve safety while also accommodating vendors near the rest area stalled in 2014 as dialogue among vendors and the various governments broke down.

Years later, nearly everyone agrees something has to be done to make the place safer.

The New Mexico Department of Transportation does not allow vending in the right of way and plans to post signs this week. According to Emilee Cantrell, spokesperson for the department, it's up to local law enforcement to enforce the restriction. But vending has been a way of life at the bridge practically since it opened and changing the culture would take a lot more than one-off citations.

"The present areas used for vending are within the right of way for US 64 and present a serious public safety hazard," the network's proposal states.

Some vendors agree. "It seems like a country road, but there's always big rigs running and tourists turning without thinking. We're all nervous out here," Michael Martinez, a vendor in his seventh season, told *The Taos News* Monday (Aug. 7).

Several vendors who didn't want to be quoted said they were surprised such a serious accident hadn't happened sooner.

But vendors, who don't have permits to sell at the bridge and generally have no overhead other than a table and vehicle, are worried the renewed calls for safety will push them out of the area entirely and bring an end to their income.

"This market feeds families," said vendor Jared Casillas. "It'll still be congested whether we're here or not."

"It may take a few years, but we will have a safer and more beautiful bridge," Luanne Dreyer Elliot of the Gorge Bridge Safety Network said, noting safety efforts continue to need strong community support.

Martinez, the vendor, suggested a few more immediate remedies to the roadside dangers, like lowering the speed limit from 45 miles per hour and having police ready to hand out tickets to drivers who ignore it.

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