

Editorial

Long past time to fix Gorge Bridge

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The Rio Grande Gorge Bridge is beautiful.

And it is deadly.

The elderly man struck and severely injured recently by a hit-and-run driver who veered off the road near the bridge is the latest tragedy.

The time is long past for decisive collaboration and action from state, federal and pueblo governments, vendors and the public to do what should have been done a decade ago: fix the bridge and the parking areas to make them safer.

Make them safer:

- So that people cannot easily climb up over the railing and jump off of the 650-foot-high bridge to their death.
- So that elderly and disabled people can walk or wheelchair out along the edge of the bridge for the stunning and awe-inspiring views.
- So that parents worry less about their children suddenly breaking free and darting in front of too-fastmoving vehicles.
- And so that the vendors who have for years made a living and provided a service to visitors can do so without further endangering themselves or the people who stop to see the bridge.

Several years ago, there were options and a plan for addressing some of these concerns. The plan languished on the desk of a prior governor and went nowhere.

The members of the Gorge Bridge Safety Network, co-founded by a mother who lost her son to suicide at the bridge, have spent three years working with various officials on a plan to make the bridge safer.

They are now in the middle of introducing the plan and seeking approval from partners.

We applaud their efforts. We think the plan they produce ultimately should receive support and funding from lawmakers and whoever is governor.

Among the possible safety measures that we wholeheartedly support:

- Add see-through pedestrian barriers, 8 feet tall, along the railing on both sides of the bridge to help deter suicides. This should be done within the next two years.
- Widen the pedestrian walkways on both sides of the bridge.
- Build a wheelchair-accessible walkway from the Bureau of Land Management rest area to the bridge on the southwest side.

- Put in some handicapped-only parking spaces on the northwest side of the bridge and install a wheelchair- accessible walkway to the bridge sidewalk.
- Reduce the posted speed limit across the bridge.
- Create a dedicated space for vendors in a reserved areawell off the road, preferably near the rest area. It should be designed so as not to detract from the view.

It is not cheap to accomplish these steps. But money follows political will and commitment. Lawmakers and the governor need to ask themselves – if it was their loved one who jumped off the bridge or was injured by a driver, how fast would they move then to correct the situation?

The Rio Grande Gorge Bridge is a treasure in New Mexico that attracts thousands of visitors a year.

It does not have to be so deadly.

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