

December 18th, 2020

Virginia Commonwealth Transportation Board

Alison DeTuncq - Culpeper District Member

Scott Kasprovicz - At-Large Urban Member

Greg Yates - At-Large Rural Member

Re: Jordan River Bridge and Early Automobile Age Historic Treasures

Dear Commonwealth Transportation Members,

Piedmont Environmental Council (PEC) is a non-profit land conservation and land use advocacy group established in 1972 to promote and protect the northern Piedmont's rural economy, natural resources, history and beauty. Since 2014 we have been researching and submitting comments to VDOT regarding lack of maintenance and resulting proposals to replace historic bridges in Virginia. While some progress has been made to document what remains in use, we continue to see proposals for replacement of historically and culturally significant bridges and other transportation related resources. The most recent bridge slated for replacement is the Jordan River Bridge in Rappahannock County. More on this specific bridge below.

We are frustrated by the lack of planning by the agency. So long as the maintenance for these structures is deferred or outright ignored, we will continue to lose them through attrition. This blatant demolition by neglect has left us with few surviving structures and VDOT with a clear path to continue to propose replacement over preservation. We contend that these historic treasures are the responsibility of the commonwealth and that VDOT should not be allowed to ignore their care and upkeep. Their contributions to our history and the character of the areas which they help define is immense and their rarity makes each new loss more painful.

The "Management Plan for Historic Bridges in Virginia"¹ produced in 2001 and updated in 2018 provides an inventory of the 35 remaining historic bridges and makes some recommendations. However, we have and continue to argue that VDOT needs to reevaluate all of their potentially historic bridges constructed more than 50 years ago and provide information about the current condition of these structures. Over the past two decades numerous early automobile age metal truss bridges have been replaced, including some that are recognized by VDOT and VDHR as historically significant. It has also come to our attention that other transportation treasures are not even included in the plan such as pedestrian swinging bridges.

Communities are losing historic bridges and other transportation resources at an alarming rate. Ultimately, we contend that the lack of maintenance has resulted in these bridges falling into a state of disrepair. Structures are allowed to deteriorate with the idea that replacement will occur.

¹ "A Management Plan for Historic Bridges in Virginia: The 2017 Update". Ann B. Miller, Research Scientist. Virginia Transportation Research Council. April 2018.
http://www.virginiadot.org/vtrc/main/online_reports/pdf/18-r6.pdf

There has been no proactive movement to identify which structures can be rehabilitated, nor to establish an effective maintenance plan that would protect those that remain from the current practice of “demolition by neglect”.

Many of the bridges beyond the 35 VDOT recognized as historic embody distinctive characteristics of a *type, period, or method of construction* and deserve further evaluation. However, they have been summarily written off as *common and typical examples of the time period in which they were built*. As time has passed though, their rarity and uniqueness has increased. Even those that are recognized by VDOT as historic are being replaced, sometimes with no other option offered to the community. Although mentioned as an option in the Management Plan, VDOT does not proactively plan or put aside funds for historic bridges to be converted to adaptive uses or tagged as ideal candidates for rehabilitation. Advocacy for options other than replacement falls on the shoulders of savvy residents that are able to mobilize their communities in time. Rather than communities fighting the same battle time and time again, we are simply asking for a plan and demonstration that proper maintenance will occur for these structures.

This year we were a party to the Section 106 process on the Oak Ridge Bridge² over the Norfolk Southern Railway in Nelson County. This bridge is one of the 35 bridges listed in the Management Plan. From the beginning of that process VDOT stated that “the only practical and cost effective solution is to totally replace the structure”³. Discussion and presentations to the public never offered alternatives to replacement only options for mitigation. VDOT presented options for context sensitive designs of the new structure but did not provide options for mitigation for the loss of the historic resource⁴. Currently, the mitigation aspect of this Section 106 process is being finalized and replacement of the structure will proceed after that.

There are also metal truss bridges slated for replacement that are not in VDOT’s list of 35. As previously mentioned, the Jordan River Bridge (aka North Poes Road Bridge)⁵ on North Poes Road in Rappahannock County, is one that did not make the list. While it has not been deemed historic, we and many in the community would contend otherwise. This bridge was constructed in 1935 using a dismantled span that had been a part of a larger bridge built 1909 in Madison County. The state is using 100% state maintenance funds to replace the superstructure so there is no Section 106 review. This bridge was constructed in 1935 using traditional methods and is an example of a Pin-Connected Pratt Half-Hip Pony Truss. It still has the 1930’s era substructure, maintains its original function as a truss bridge and serves its intended transportation purpose. As well, area residents clearly feel this bridge is a part of the fabric of their community. For these reasons, we believe it deserves more scrutiny prior to replacement.

² Oak Ridge Bridge. HistoricBridges.org. Nathan Holth. Bridge documented May 21, 2018.
<https://historicbridges.org/bridges/browser/?bridgebrowser=virginia/oakridgebridge/>

³ Letter from VDOT to VDHR: Section 106 Initiation. Dated August 2, 2019.
https://www.virginia.gov/projects/resources/Lynchburg/112865_project_initiation_cp_ltr.pdf

⁴ VDOT presentation: Mitigation Ideas. Presented November 13th, 2020.
https://www.virginia.gov/projects/resources/Lynchburg/Rte_653_Mitigation_Ideas.pdf

⁵ North Poes Road Bridge. HistoricBridges.org. Nathan Holth. Bridge documented May 22, 2017.
<https://historicbridges.org/bridges/browser/?bridgebrowser=virginia/northpoesroadbridge/>

Lastly, we learned about the presence of a number of pedestrian swinging bridges in Virginia. A preliminary review revealed that as many as 45 of these pedestrian bridges are more than 50 years old. This came to our attention when VDOT proposed removing two of these bridges in Criglersville in Madison County. These structures are not even mentioned in the Management Plan so we are asking VDOT to give them more attention and scrutiny before removing them.

In closing, we are asking for your assistance. We are hopeful you share our concerns and that VDOT can see their way to pausing current activities related to demolition of these structures. We ask that a comprehensive plan be developed related to the ongoing care and maintenance of these historic treasures. As well, any plan should reassess bridges of greater than 50 years of age for their historic import, taking into consideration the type, rarity, condition and rehabilitation potential of each structure. As it relates to future surveys, we would encourage VDOT to use the Department of Historic Resources guidance of no more than 5 years between any evaluation moving forward.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and please do not hesitate to reach out if you have any questions regarding this letter or related to Jordan River Bridge.

Sincerely,

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cc: John Lynch, Culpeper District Engineer