



Port of
LONG BEACH
The Green Port

Q&A

Gerald Desmond Bridge Replacement Project

Why is the Port proposing to replace the Gerald Desmond Bridge?

Replacing the Gerald Desmond Bridge is an urgent priority. The bridge is obsolete and deteriorating. It is nearing the end of its planned lifespan and handles far more traffic than it was designed for more than 40 years ago. The traffic load – between about 58,000 and 68,000 vehicles a day and 18 million vehicle trips a year – vastly exceeds its intended capacity. And the bridge’s lack of emergency lanes means that accidents snarl traffic for hours, emergency responders are delayed and vehicles are diverted into surrounding neighborhoods.

Though the bridge is safe for commuters today, it is rapidly deteriorating – even crumbling. The Port has had to install netting below the bridge to catch falling pieces of concrete and stop them from hitting the ground and waterways below.

It is imperative that we replace the bridge now. Though the Gerald Desmond is not in imminent danger of collapse, it is deteriorating each day and has been given very low ratings by California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) inspectors. The Minnesota bridge that collapsed in 2007 was the same age and type of structure as the Gerald Desmond Bridge.

Why not continue to maintain the existing bridge?

Even with costly maintenance, the existing bridge cannot be sustained long-term. With an estimated hundreds of millions of dollars in repairs, the bridge’s life could be extended by another 10 years. But by that time, the cost of a new bridge would be significantly higher. And even the most costly repairs could not fix the traffic and safety issues.

The bridge is a key thoroughfare connecting downtown Long Beach and Orange County to San Pedro and Los Angeles. The bridge is also a critical part of our national infrastructure and carries about 15 percent of the nation’s waterborne cargo, after it arrives at the local ports.

Therefore, the new bridge, with a 100-year lifespan, is a prudent investment in the future of the community, Port, region, state and nation.

Is the existing bridge safe?

Although the bridge is safe for commuters today, it has received very low ratings from CalTrans inspectors.

The bridge has received low scores in three key areas:

- The superstructure was rated “poor,” with a score of 4 out of 9 points, due to advanced pockets of corrosion. This score classifies the bridge as “structurally deficient.”
- The bridge’s concrete deck was upgraded from “critical condition” to “satisfactory” following recent repairs that cost \$1 million. However, serious deck issues remain. Netting has been installed to catch falling pieces of concrete and prevent them from hitting the waterways and roads beneath the bridge.
- In the overall “sufficiency rating” category, the bridge received a score of 48 out of a possible 100. Any score below 50 means the bridge is eligible for replacement under the federal Highway Bridge Program.

The bridge has also been inspected and rated on a National Standard Rating System. The national ratings are very low and indicate the bridge should be replaced.

If the Port waits to replace the bridge, the maintenance issues will become more severe. As the bridge ages, it is increasingly likely that Caltrans inspectors could uncover a deficiency that could require the bridge to be shut down.

How would a new bridge improve traffic safety?

The bridge’s current traffic far exceeds its intended capacity. Between 58,000 and 68,000 vehicles a day use the bridge, which adds up to about 18 million vehicle trips a year. By 2015, traffic is expected to increase to as much as 20 million trips a year, thus increasing congestion significantly during peak hours.

The new bridge would have three lanes on both sides for a total of six lanes (the existing bridge is five lanes: three lanes up and two lanes down), along with emergency lanes on both sides for towing and emergency vehicle access. These added lanes would help reduce bridge slowdowns and closures that divert traffic into nearby Westside Long Beach neighborhoods.

Isn't this project really about adding more cargo traffic at the shipping terminals north of the bridge?

No. The Gerald Desmond Bridge would need to be replaced even if cargo volumes at the Port did not increase. Traffic and maintenance issues are the primary reasons for the bridge's replacement. Cargo ships could continue to serve the inner harbor terminals (Piers A and C, and the future Pier S) with the existing bridge.

However, the bridge's vertical clearance is among the lowest at any port in the nation. The new design would raise the clearance from 165 feet to 200 feet. A higher clearance would mean that larger, greener ships (ones that can plug into clean, electric shore power) would be able to access Inner Harbor shipping terminals.

Why build the bridge now, when the economy and cargo volumes are down?

Again, traffic and maintenance issues are the primary reasons for the bridge's replacement, not cargo volumes. The bridge needs to be replaced whether the economy is strong or weak. However, there are some significant advantages to undertaking a major construction project in a weak economy. The bridge project will help boost the local economy tremendously, through increased economic activity and job creation.

What kind of economic impact would the project have?

Bridge construction would provide a significant and immediate economic boost to Long Beach and the Southern California region. The \$1.1 billion in spending would sustain economic activity of \$2.8 billion in Southern California, according to a Los Angeles Economic Development Corp. analysis. The construction alone would support, on average, 4,000 jobs a year for five years.

Will local grants be made available through the bridge project, similar to the Middle Harbor Redevelopment Project?

Yes, but mitigation grant funding for the bridge project will likely be less than it is for the Middle Harbor project, because the environmental impacts are less significant. The grant program is consistent with the California Environmental Quality Act and allows the Port to award local grants based on assessed environmental impacts.

How is the project being financed?

The bridge will be financed through a combination of federal and state funds, as well as Port revenues. Historically, the federal government has financed projects that improve access to the Port (such as roads, waterways and bridges), while Port revenues have financed improvements to the shipping terminals themselves. The Port expects to provide matching funds for the bridge, between 10 percent and 15 percent of the total funding.

As of February 2010, the Port has secured about half of the total funding for the bridge. With the federal impetus to fund "shovel ready" infrastructure projects, the Port expects to secure the remaining funding once the environmental review process is completed.

How does the bridge fit into future I-710 improvement plans?

Port engineers and transportation planners are working closely with Caltrans to ensure that the bridge project is planned in conjunction with future improvements to the Long Beach (I-710) Freeway. The two projects will be compatible.

Also, once the new bridge is completed, it will be relinquished to the State of California as part of the highway system and become a state asset.