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DAGSpace: Revisioning the South Street Bridge

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The revisioning of the South Street Bridge is a story about lessons learned: that simply following the letter of the law is not enough, that public outcry works, that priorities change and that participative processes are a must. Stories about the early process for designing a new South Street Bridge are conflicting. Government officials insisted that the public had been given every opportunity to comment on the proposed Bridge design, and few had chosen to do so. Members of the community claimed that when they first asked to participate in 1999 they were told it was too early and when they wanted to comment on the design that was finally presented to them in 2007 they were told it was too late.

Simply Following The Letter Of The Law Is Not Enough

Design of the new Bridge began in 1995 and two public meetings, as required by law to meet NEPA requirements, were held in 1996 and 1999. One other meeting was held in the summer of 2001, but since this meeting was not required as part of the NEPA process there is no official record of the meeting content or attendance. It is known, however, that while the design was not far enough along for meaningful public input concerning specific design details, the size and type of bridge had already been decided. At that time Inquirer columnist Inga Saffron started writing articles criticizing the design and advocating for a holistic effort to create a welcoming and pedestrian friendly connector between Center City and West Philadelphia.

The Streets Department also met privately with Odunde (in 2003) about potential impacts on its June festival, the Bicycle Coalition (in 2004) regarding barriers and the University of Pennsylvania. Although the City claims to have done public outreach, they never approached the two relevant civic associations, Center City Residents' Association (CCRA) and South of South Neighborhood Association (SOSNA).

Public Outcry Works

The community's requests for input into the Bridge design had gone unheeded and in January 2007 neighbors took additional action. Testimony was given against the Bridge design and process at a City Council hearing about acquiring rights of way, and a public meeting was held where the final design was presented to the neighborhood on the east side of the Bridge.

At the January meeting the City again insisted that the public had been given every opportunity to comment on the proposed Bridge design and that it was too late to make changes. In addition to outrage about the process, many were upset about the design which seemed to be more of a high speed connection with the expressway than a connection between Center City and University City:



Calls for a redesign process with neighborhood input fell on deaf ears as public officials stuck to their position that the community had ample opportunity in the past to comment and that the design was both functional and aesthetically pleasing. But the community, with leadership from Terry Gillen and Jim Campbell, persisted.

Priorities Change

Certain problems with the proposed design were immediately apparent. The scale looked more like an expressway (image above) than a bridge connecting one primarily

residential neighborhood to an urban campus (image below from a University of Pennsylvania report looking the opposite way):



Even with bike lanes and wider sidewalks, the proposed five-lane design seemed to favor motorized vehicular traffic and ease of access on and off the expressway. The design did not adequately reflect the paradigm shift in transportation planning that favors balanced use for pedestrians, bicycles and motorized vehicles.

Stainless steel towers and highway lighting reinforced the expressway image and evoked none of the look and feel of the surrounding neighborhoods. The towers also provided an enclosure that raised safety concerns.

It was generally felt that the proposed design did not reflect the function or elegance of the original bridge. Compare these images:



Participative Processes Are A Must

Letters and petitions criticizing the Bridge design and process started pouring into local and state officials in 2007. Inga Saffron, Bruce Schimmel, and other reporters wrote articles calling for changes to the design. Neighbors and neighborhood groups (e.g., CCRA, SOSNA, South Street West Business Association, Bicycle Coalition of Greater Philadelphia, Schuylkill River Park Alliance) joined together to form The South Street Bridge Coalition with Jim Campbell as the director. The Coalition's sole objective was to implement a participative process to document the public's concerns and proposed modifications so a Bridge more reflective of its use and context could be designed.

Meetings were held with Coalition members, neighborhood representatives and elected officials to discuss how to proceed. A pivotal meeting occurred in November 2007 at The Philadelphia School when State Senator Vince Fumo agreed to take up the neighbors' cause and subsequently secured a State grant to study the redesign of the Bridge. The Coalition hired Wallace Roberts and Todd (WRT), with Richard Huffman as partner-in-charge, and transportation engineering firm JzT, with Frank Jaskiewicz as the prime consultant.

In March 2008, the Coalition conducted a design charrette attended by almost one hundred people, including engineers from the Streets Department. Though the Coalition and the neighborhood no longer held out much hope that the new Bridge would be as architecturally rich as the old Bridge, everyone wanted to ensure that the new Bridge at least felt like a continuation of a city street rather than an interstate. A consensus on desired modifications emerged and was later documented in a sixty three page report, *The Neighborhood Vision for the South Street Bridge*.

With just weeks to go before Philadelphia was to hire a contractor to rebuild the Bridge, the Coalition distributed copies of the report (including to elected officials) and organized a letter writing campaign. Nearly two hundred citizens wrote to Mayor Michael A. Nutter and other elected officials urging them to endorse the changes detailed in the report.

After its publication, the Mayor directed the Streets Department and asked PennDOT to conduct a series of meetings with the South St. Bridge Coalition and Democratic Ward Leader Marcia Wilkof to consider the proposed changes. The "Design Modification

Resolution Team” met for over thirty hours, achieved consensus on what modifications could be implemented and presented its final report to the Mayor on July 15, 2008.

Key changes include a reduction from five vehicular lanes to four; a pedestrian activated traffic signal at the ramp to Schuylkill River Park; wider painted bicycle lanes; 25 mph speed limit; translucent barriers at the railroads; pedestrian lighting and crosswalks; advanced bicycle stop bars; turning radii at the Schuylkill Expressway ramps reduced to the minimum allowed by FHWA; bicycle safe roadway grates; vertical treatment on guiderails and more decorative sidewalks. Additionally, DVRPC received funding from PennDOT to undertake a traffic study to determine how traffic is dispersed during the Bridge closure so that future modifications can be better informed.

Recommendations that could not be immediately incorporated were closing the Schuylkill Expressway on-ramps; installing a barrier between the vehicles and bikes/pedestrians; keeping the existing “kink” ; limiting truck size; further increasing the sidewalk width; installing planted raised medians; installing transparent rather than translucent barriers about the rail lines; installing bus stop islands at the regional rail station; and installing a new enhanced plaza at Franklin Field.

The Mayor supported these recommendations and charged the Streets Department with implementing them. The Streets Department then secured approval from the relevant State and Federal agencies.

On November 10, 2008, the Mayor announced that the Bridge project would begin in December, made public the modifications incorporated in the new design, stated that detour meetings were underway, and announced that a public process would begin after the first of the year to consider design changes to the portion of the towers above the road deck.

The Bridge closed Monday, December 8th after a ceremonial last walk/bicycle ride. The Design Modification Resolution Team is preparing to enter the final stage of the revisioning process: reengaging the designers and the public in a meaningful dialogue, the end result of which will be a redesign of the towers at and above the road deck, giving us all a safer and friendlier South Street Bridge.

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As has been done throughout the process, the community will continue to receive South Street Bridge update letters distributed via email by the Coalition and the Ward Leader.

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