

Concerns raised about Aurora's plan for new bridge over Fox River

chicagotribune.com/suburbs/aurora-beacon-news/news/ct-abn-aurora-bridge-st-0104-20180103-story.html

Steve Lord



Some concerns have been raised about the planned pedestrian bridge over the Fox River in Aurora.

Aurora is getting closer to bidding the about \$15 million Aurora Transportation Center enhancement project. Perhaps the most visible and talked about part of the project has been a 900-foot curved pedestrian and bicycle bridge that would connect bike trails on the west and east banks of the Fox River, going over Blues Island.

ADVERTISING

The bridge would be built at two elevations, with pedestrians using a lower elevation on the south side of the bridge and bikes using a higher elevation on the north side. In the middle of the bridge, on the island, the span would widen to create an overlook for people to view the river, island and downtown Aurora.

The bridge also would be illuminated at night and include some programmable lights for special occasions or to match what is happening onstage at RiverEdge Park.

The bridge has been identified by some as a luxury. In particular, some people have singled it out as a possible reason the city's local tax levy is increasing this year.

Several weeks ago, and again at this week's City Council Committee of the Whole meeting, residents of the Stonegate Carillon subdivision on the East Side said they would like the pedestrian bridge taken out of the project.

Dick Smith, a resident, said he has seen no studies that show the pedestrian bridge would have any "positive impact."

"Nobody really looked to see if it was a worthy use of funds," he said.

But Stephanie Phifer of the city's Planning Department and Ken Schroth, city engineer and Public Works director, said the bridge is needed in the project and that there are benefits to it. The bridge connects the East Side of the river to the West Side, where the city has several underused parking lots. With the bridge, those lots become usable for commuters using the Transportation Center, as well as RiverEdge Park and parts of the downtown, Phifer said.

It was the pedestrian bridge — which is estimated at about \$3.3 million — that convinced the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning to rate the project highly. In turn, the federal government also rated it highly, and awarded the city \$11.4 million in Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality funding toward the overall project. The federal government also granted as much as another \$2.8 million in funds to cover cost increases in the project, although at this point, it appears the city will use only about \$1.4 million of that.

The pedestrian bridge also connects the Kane County Forest Preserve District bike trails on the west and east sides of the river, which is why the district gave Aurora a \$2 million grant toward the project, city officials said.

The overall project, which was first part of a downtown master plan in 2005, is being funded by the federal funds, the Forest Preserve grant, and some city money included in a \$5 million general obligation bond passed in 2016.

The increase in the city's tax levy this year is attributable to public safety pension funds the city is required to pay by the state and not the planned bridge, city officials said.

Aldermen this week discussed an amended agreement with the [Illinois Department of Transportation](#) to approve final costs for the whole Transportation Center project that will include more parking, a different bus pulse point, refiguring of several intersections along North Broadway and expansion and improvements to RiverEdge Park, along with the pedestrian bridge across the Fox River.

The City Council is expected to approve the amended agreement, which will be the last step before officials can put the project out for bids, at the Jan. 9 council meeting.

Part of the project also would add onto the southern portion of RiverEdge Park, creating a southern entrance and a beer concession stand. The beer stand at the park is being patterned after those at Summerfest in Milwaukee, which have proved to be successful, city officials said.

Other parts of the project include a total of 843 more parking spaces around the Transportation Center, with 123 at the station itself and 94 more in the lots on the west side of the river; moving the bus pulse point next to the train tracks; and relocating the traffic signal that is at the current entrance to the Two Brothers Roundhouse on North Broadway to the southern entrance of the Transportation Center.

The project is expected to provide more and easier access to the Transportation Center, and Phifer said officials think more commuters might use the center, possibly even instead of the Route 59 train station, which is the busiest on the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Metra line.

"We think there's a lot of unmet potential at the Transportation Center," Phifer said.

slord@tribpub.com