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Photo: Michael Hibblen

Like a rock

Century-old bridge could serve as new link to twin cities

By Michael Hibblen

Central Arkansas officials expect to know within a few weeks whether they will be able to take control of the old Rock Island Railroad bridge spanning the Arkansas River, saving it from eminent dismantlement. The mayors of Little Rock and North Little Rock hope to use the almost century old structure, which is now abandoned, as a foot bridge to help link the soon to be developed riverfronts of both cities.

Little Rock Mayor Jim Dailey, North Little Rock Mayor Patrick Henry Hays and Pulaski County Judge Buddy Villines met with Union Pacific CEO Dick Davidson several months ago in Little Rock and both said they're fairly confident the railroad will allow the cities to use the bridge. "They have indicated they do want to work with us on this, but they're looking at some issues for them and they're wanting to be sure they're free from liability," Mayor Dailey said.

The bridge has been unused since the 1980 bankruptcy of the Rock Island Railroad. Engineering rooms on the bridge are now being lived in by the homeless and the structure has been extensively vandalized. The bridge is now owned by Union Pacific Railroad, which acquired the bridge along with 37 miles of track from Little Rock to Carlisle. The track along that line has long since been taken up, and the bridge isn't being used since Union Pacific has two other, more convenient bridges that span the Arkansas River at Little Rock.

A plan was in place to have the bridge taken down. The lift span that raises and lowers for river traffic was to be removed and placed on a bridge in Washington state and the three remaining spans were to be scrapped. But Union Pacific spokesman Mark Davis said, "the project that the lift span was going to be used in is now not going to happen, and right now the railroad has no plans for its use." When a bridge is no longer in use, railroads are required by federal regulations to remove them, and officials have said this bridge would have to be removed. Officials in Pulaski County are hoping to persuade Union Pacific not to do that, and instead allow them to use it as

part of the river project.

Hays thinks the issue of liability can be resolved to everyone's satisfaction: "All sides involved have good legal representatives working on this and I'm confident we'll be able to come up with some kind of arrangement or some kind of insurance to cover anything that could happen."

If Union Pacific agrees to allow the bridge to be used, UP attorney Paul Benham, with the Friday, Eldredge and Clark Law Firm of Little Rock, said the railroad would most likely donate the bridge to the county. "The railroad already has a policy in place whereby they donate land and property when it is no longer of any use or value to the company," Benham said he has analyzed the request to use the bridge and gave a report to company officials: "I think if it can be done with no hidden contingencies that could open the railroad up for liability, that they will look favorably upon the request. Union Pacific is working hard to try and accommodate the request, because they were impressed with the ambitious group effort by the county and cities to try and do something positive to enhance the community."

The bridge was built in 1899 by the short-lived Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf Railroad. Reporting on the Choctaw's inaugural run, the *Arkansas Gazette* described the bridge as one of the finest of its kind. The Choctaw Railroad and the bridge were absorbed by the Rock Island a few years later. The only major change in the bridge since that time was the installation of the lift span in 1972, which allows commercial river traffic to pass under the bridge.

If the bridge is donated for use in the river project, the question still remains as to who will run the bridge. "I don't think that bridge has been crossed yet," Hays quipped. "Right now, we're just trying to get the right to use the bridge and then, once Union Pacific agrees on letting us use it, I'm sure we'll be able to work out some kind of an agreement." He said the bridge could be run by an entity that has yet to be formed; the county, or it could be controlled jointly between the cities of Little

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Rock and North Little Rock.

The costs of making much-needed repairs to the bridge and of running it is another hurdle, but one that doesn't alarm either of the mayors. "It would be wise in the long run to keep the bridge," Dailey said. "It could easily cost \$100 million dollars if we were to build a new bridge, whereas I think we could spend a couple million dollars to preserve the Rock Island bridge."

Hays said he is already planning ahead as if Union Pacific will let the cities use the bridge. Among his plans for the potential foot bridge is to line the bridge in lights to outline the shape of the spans, and give the bridge an improved appearance. "I would like for the bridge to be considered the eastern gate to the district," Hays said.

Beyond simply providing a link between the cities, Hays also sees some possible civic and social functions being held on the bridge: "We went to a bridge in Chattanooga, Tennessee, that was converted into a footbridge, and they've used that for weddings, parties and civic events. I would like to see us using this bridge for things like that."

The discussions with Union Pacific also include the company's Junction bridge, which sits in the middle of Little Rock's Riverfront Park, just west of the I-30 bridge. "I'd like to use that bridge for light rail or rubber-wheeled trolleys, and maybe some pedestrian traffic," Dailey said. But unlike the Rock Island bridge, Union Pacific would likely maintain ownership of the Junction bridge, regardless of what kind of agreement it reached with county officials.

Railroad officials want to keep it as a back-up if anything happens to the Baring Cross bridge, which is the railroad's main bridge across the river, located west of the Broadway bridge.

While the light rail on the Junction bridge would initially be used to get people to and from the planned arena, Hays has a larger goal, that of mass transit. "Some of us envision a much larger form of a light rail system that would not only connect the two riverfronts, but could also service other parts of central Arkansas. Possibly offering light rail service to the airport, to the Pinnacle Mountain area, Levy, McCain Mall and moving out towards England and Jacksonville."

But for right now the goal of the mayors is to preserve the Rock Island bridge. As Dailey put it, "from a historical perspective, the bridges are like the laces on the shoes that tie Little Rock and North Little Rock together."

Hays, who once worked as a railroad fireman, is equally passionate about keeping the bridge because of its history, but also because it is one more way to allow people access to both sides of the river. "Hopefully, we'll be able to find so many ways for people to cross the river that it'll seem like you can almost jump across to the other side. "We want to make it that easy, so that families can do events on both sides of the river," Hays said. "So that while mom is shopping in the new shops coming for Little Rock, dad and the kids can fly a kite or do something on the North Little Rock side, without it being any kind of hassle to get across."

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