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Colwood faces hard choices on bridge, peninsula



Kathleen and Richard Norman stroll across the Esquimalt Lagoon Bridge on Friday. The bridge is scheduled for repair for vehicle traffic starting July 5, but its future is less certain.

Edward Hill/News staff

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As Colwood prepares to mend its ailing Esquimalt Lagoon bridge, the coveted Coburg peninsula faces a future squeezed between the forces of nature and the high price of preservation.

The 80-year-old bridge rests on the spit of an eroding three-kilometre peninsula that forms a barrier for the lagoon and popular beach for the region. A Colwood public forum last week outlined a series of options to guide the protection of the peninsula, including exotic and expensive barrier islands to “doing nothing” for zero dollars.

Since the bridge was closed to traffic on Feb. 3, Colwood public sentiment has been uniformly divided.

“Many people say it’s really nice, leave it closed. But just as many say get on with it and open the bridge as fast

as you can,” said Coun. Judith Cullington. “Some love it, some hate it.”

Colwood has permits to dig up and refill the bridge’s north abutment to repair a sinkhole, but that doesn’t solve the lingering issue of erosion on spit. At the meeting in the John Stubbs school gym, residents had a free lesson in marine geology.

For the past 100 years, the now-closed gravel pit operations south of the lagoon fed sediment to the peninsula, creating the sandy beach that exists today. As Rowland Atkins, a geomorphologist with Golder Associates, pointed out, “the tap is off.”

Without armouring the bridge abutments, erosion will eventually suck away sediment, causing the span to either fall down or become a bridge to nowhere. Without protecting the beach, the peninsula will erode away, become narrower and migrate west toward Ocean Boulevard and the lagoon.

“You’ve got a drain at the far end. Sediment is always moving out of the north end and that’s never going to stop,” Atkins said to the audience. “Trying to keep fixed structures, the bridge and the road, on something moving underneath it is hard to do.

“The location today is not the permanent location. It’s highly dynamic, highly variable and depends on sediment and wave energy. I don’t want to paint a totally bleak picture. A lot of options are relatively successful, but they aren’t cheap.”

A Seabulk Systems consultant report from 2008 offered engineering ideas to reduce erosion. For around \$35,000, Colwood could armour the bridge abutment in rip rap, which would do little for the peninsula. For about \$2 million, it could armour the entire peninsula, but that would detract from the beach as a recreation destination.

Colwood could dredge offshore and replenish the beach every five or 10 years for about \$2.5 million, or set up a series of groynes (small breakwaters) for about \$5 million. A series of offshore breakwater came in at \$12 million. These days, Colwood has little borrowing power and almost any project would hike taxes.

Some residents at the meeting pressed for the bridge to be reopened and other called for the entire area to be come a park.

Colwood resident John Mason, Langford’s city engineer, argued that it might not be worth the expense and engineering work to preserve a bridge and road that nature doesn’t want. He called for the peninsula and lagoon to become a regional park, an option Colwood has considered in the past.

One resident asked if the “tap could be turned back on,” if sediment could be imported again from the Lehigh gravel mine, an option that would need co-operation with the landowner.

Another pointed out that saving the bridge should be the priority, as the peninsula changes slowly over time and hasn’t changed much at all over the past 40 years. Others took the opportunity to call for traffic calming on Ocean Boulevard, saying the road is abused as a commuter speedway.

Mayor Dave Saunders said council wants to get the bridged fixed and open, but argued securing long-term future of the peninsula will need funding from the federal and provincial governments.

With a federal migratory bird sanctuary, Department of Defence property on the peninsula, archeological midden sites along the beach, and nearby Fort Rodd Hill, Colwood isn’t the only government body with jurisdiction around the lagoon, Saunders pointed out.

He also cautioned that installing breakwaters and rip-rap along Coburg could influence coastal erosion south along Metchosin’s waterfront.

“If we only protect Colwood’s part, what happens to Metchosin’s side? We’ve got to be careful and have all levels of government working together,” he said. “We don’t want the city on the hook for a liability.”

Check out www.colwood.ca for engineering reports on the bridge and the peninsula. Contact the city hall at 250-478-5541 to fill out an opinion form.

Rebuilding the bridge

Colwood has a hard July 5 start date to dig up lagoon bridge north abutment. Work is expected to take between one and two weeks and the bridge will be closed to pedestrian and vehicle traffic.

The abutment will be packed with rock, fill and geotextile material. Construction crews won’t dig below beach level to avoid disturbing potential First Nations burial sites, said city engineer Michael Baxter. The City is replacing the original abutment that has been in place for 80 years.

Repairs are being paid for through donations from developers such as Essencia and the use of equipment from Saunders, and should cost nothing to taxpayers.

To repair the abutment, permits and sign-off was needed from the Ministry of Environment, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Navigable Waters and the B.C. archeology branch. July 5 has optimal low tides.

Baxter said so far, no sinkholes have emerged on the south side of the bridge. How long the repairs will last depends on the ferocity of winter storms and wave action against the bridge and the spit.

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