



# WARD ST BRIDGE - TOWN HALL RECAP - SEPT 29th, 2025



*This post serves as an unofficial recap of tonight's Town Hall, for members of the "Holler About Hightstown" group and social media followers of The Hightstown Democrat. All are encouraged to attend meetings in-person or review the official meeting minutes when posted.*

Mayor Susan Bluth began the meeting by summarizing recent developments on the bridge project, including her request to Mercer County for a town hall in Hightstown. With that, she introduced County Engineer Basit "Sunny" Muzaffar to present a history of the project and the proposed plan forward. He was joined by the assistant county engineer and a design consultant.

Sunny set the ground rules for this meeting, stating that he would listen to residents' concerns following his presentation, and that "anything we discuss here is fair game. If I can't satisfy you, I'll go back and figure out a way to make it work for you."

## History

The Ward St Bridge was originally constructed in 1896, and has undergone three major rehabilitation efforts in 1950, 1969, and 2002. However, in 1980, a bridge inspection uncovered issues that downgraded its capacity from 10 tons to 3 tons. In 2002, a sidewalk was added to accommodate the pedestrians - a decision that proved to be ill-fated. This sidewalk was cantilevered off one side of the bridge, and its weight was cited as a cause of more recent cracking, section loss, and issues with the bridge's truss.

Several years ago, former Mayor Larry Quattrone informed the County Engineer that school buses were crossing the bridge, exceeding its weight limit. The County Engineer presented an option: either enforce the speed limit, or close the bridge. Mayor Quattrone, having determined that the Borough could not afford the police presence that enforcement would require, opted to immediately close the bridge.

## Replacement Design

Three prior meetings were held: a field meeting October 22nd 2021, held at the bridge, as well as two virtual public information meetings in November '21 and February '22.

The county first presented the minimum design that NJ State would accept: Sidewalk, shoulders, and lanes. Concerns over the bridge's increased width led to removal of the sidewalk, which was instead added back as a separate 6'-wide pedestrian bridge - an adjacent, standalone structure that would be built first.

Then, recognizing that the design must comply with Complete Streets policies at the Borough, County, and State levels, the design evolved to accommodate pedestrians, cyclists, and vehicles as required. This led to a compromise where the two 12' traffic lanes were reduced to 11' lanes, and the 4' shoulders on each side were repurposed as 5' bike lanes.

## **Traffic Calming**

Ward St, as a 25mph road, would not require a buffer between the car lanes and bike lanes. However, a similar project in West Windsor was referenced, showing that in their case, bollards were able to be installed to separate the bike lanes and roadway, maintaining a narrow roadway while protecting cyclists. If added to the Ward St bridge, such dividers would keep the roadway portion at its original width.

Other options, such as concrete "jersey barriers" were not feasible. In this case, such barriers would require "end treatment" that would then take away part of a Peddie School driveway, two resident driveways, and obstruct the greenway access.

Acknowledging that signs alone do not cause drivers to respect the speed limit, the County Engineer also voiced support for speedbumps on Ward St.

Other options proposed included making the roadway along Maxwell and Ward less hospitable to truck traffic, such as via the creation of a roundabout at the intersection of Ward & Maxwell. This had previously been considered and supported by the Borough Council, but shelved due to budgetary constraints.

As for creation of a "low-height" bar, this idea was rejected, citing a recent case where one caused an individual's beheading. The engineers stated that such bars could only be used when they were to address existing safety concerns, such as preventing vehicles from colliding with existing low-height structures such as a low overpass.

## **Historic Preservation**

The entire project is built around rehabilitation of the bridge's historic truss, as overseen by the State Historic Preservation Office. When the Ward St Bridge was rehabbed in 1950, its deck

and stringers were removed. Due to this replacement, only the truss remains as an original historic element.

This truss is a double-intersecting truss, and the Washington's Crossing bridge is the only other one like it in NJ. Across the bridge's various rehab efforts, metal plates have been added to strengthen the trusses' members, and bolts have replaced some original rivets. Those modifications will be reversed, with the truss to be restored using authentic construction materials and techniques..

In this new design, a replacement bridge would be constructed using supports from below, while a preserved truss would be added as a decorative element. It would support its own weight, but not that of the roadway.

According to one resident, the bridge has been eligible since 2001 to be a national historic landmark, though the decision was made to not register it until the upcoming work was complete. Recognizing this, the county staff stated that the historic preservation plan was done under conditions "as if the truss was on the national historic register," with this added as a project requirement as to not impact its eligibility.

In crafting this new design, NJ state's conditions of approval described the rivet shapes, color, and overall appearance. Mercer County agreed to these terms.

Other design choices were made to maintain the look and feel of the surrounding area. Stones present around the bridge today will be cut, with their facing re-added to the bridge area. The roadway will be treated to appear a dark gray, thereby hiding the tan concrete roadway and matching today's road color. Lastly, the girders underneath the new bridge will be painted black to hide in the shadows, giving the same appearance as today's bridge.

At this point, the county feels they have done their due diligence, and cited their other recent bridge work as an example of success. The county staff presented the example of a similar project, the Bear Tavern Road bridge in Hopewell, that was restored to similar standards. That original plan was to move Hopewell's truss to a park, but when that option fell through, the truss was moved into storage, restored, and successfully added as a decorative element to Hopewell's next viable bridge project. The end result has been well received by that community.

## **Replacement Timeframe**

In September of 2021, the County Commissioners agreed to replace the Ward St bridge. Though design and permitting work for such projects usually lasts two to three years, the preservation work and complications with utility line relocations extended this timeframe. JCP&L was described as "a difficult partner," with long negotiations over the relocation of their utility lines. Exacerbating this situation was significant personnel turnover at JCP&L, leading

negotiations to re-start from scratch several times - an unusual situation not seen on most projects.

Mercer County then proceeded through three rounds of NJDOT questions and approvals, including addressing the historic element. Lastly, NJ's Dept Community Affairs is now performing their own review, one required for any project over \$12M. That process is almost complete, and Mercer County Commissioners also last month signed a project labor agreement, ensuring that local union labor is used in this project. Any effort over \$5M requires such a labor agreement, ensuring the funds are paid back into the community.

What remains to be done is factoring in any changes from resident's feedback, and receipt of this final NJ state approval. Once complete, the project specifications will be put out to bid, and awarded to a construction firm. The construction itself will take over 500 calendar days, a lengthy process due to the preservation efforts and need to preserve existing homes along the lake.

## **Protection of Homes**

The most at-risk home will include a requirement for a structural engineer to assess the home, pre-construction, and design a system to stabilize the house during the project. This could include shifting to alternate means of construction, dependent on the current state of the house after its assessment. However, this cannot be assessed until the county is allowed access to that property.

Once assessed, the home would also be outfitted with vibration monitors, and Mercer County would accept responsibility for any damage, should any still occur. This is a home built in the late 1800s that lacks a concrete foundation, as described by the homeowner in attendance at the meeting.

The current plan calls for the use of hydraulic rams rather than driving sheet piles. These push the bridge supports into the soil, rather than pounding them, which significantly minimizes vibrations. These support piles will also be open-ended rather than closed, which further reduces vibrations. Such design then requires longer piles, but Mercer County will bear these necessary costs to protect the homes.

## **Design Alternatives**

Many residents asked about significant alternatives to the current path, such as leaving the bridge as-is, or designing a small bridge with a low weight capacity. This led to a spirited

discussion motivated by a variety of factors, both for and against the project:

- Ward St and nearby residents opposing a design that would accommodate trucks
- Other residents seeking relief from traffic caused by the bridge closure, particularly the trucks making frequent and difficult detours at Clinton/Cole and Ward/S Main.
- Questions over the validity of the historic preservation, and whether the surrounding neighborhood and Peddie School should be deemed historic in its entirety
- Fear that without the bridge, trucks are using more dangerous routes through the downtown
- Frustration with the process to date, with reports of limited options presented at earlier committee meetings
- Concern that limiting vehicle access to Hightstown would stifle future economic growth and prevent industrial property redevelopment
- Worries that Hightstown would not receive assistance in installing traffic calming measures to coincide with the new bridge

Hearing these concerns, the county staff described their role as engineers, and the options at hand. County Commissioner Lucille Walter also introduced herself from the audience, stating that she was attending to hear these concerns, and would be taking them back to Mercer County's elected officials.

If the bridge were to be left as-is, it would cost \$5.6M to stabilize it and prevent its collapse, leaving it as a pedestrian-only structure. Mercer County would not be willing to fund a project of this nature, which would no longer be a road, though they would transfer ownership of the bridge to Hightstown to do so. Given the state of Hightstown's finances, this is not feasible.

In order for the truss to hold any roadway, even of limited weight, nearly every one of the truss's 180+ segments would need to be replaced. For this reason, every alternative with historic preservation in mind required creation of a separate support structure, and use of the truss as decoration.

The new bridge, rated at three times the carrying capacity of the original, would cost ~\$15M. This cost is also driven by creation of the pedestrian bridge and the historic preservation process.

Regarding whether a bridge could be made to a lower capacity, such as the original weight rating, the requirements of state and federal money were cited, necessitating that any project accommodate "all live loads." Even moreso, the engineers cited their professional liability and ethics as standing in the way of such a limited design. With the rapidly increasing weight of today's vehicles, even SUVs could be over such limits, and no method of preventing a truck would be 100% foolproof. They could not in good conscience design a bridge that would collapse if a modern vehicle circumvented all prevention measures. To this, one resident agreed, pointing out how many vehicles are still trying to turn onto Wyckoff Mills Rd even in the face of large fixed barriers.

## **Next Steps**

Hightstown's new Business Administrator, John Francis Roman, ended the meeting by thanking the County for their presentations, and thanking residents for their concerns. He pledged, on behalf of the Mayor, to pursue funding for traffic calming efforts to coincide with the new bridge. Concerned residents were welcomed to continue discussion with him, both immediately after the meeting and at any future point.