

Northern Ave. bridge demise mourned, opposed by some

By Beth Treffeisen January 22, 2016, 19:30 EDT



Boston's Northern Avenue Bridge shown in the open position. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia.org)

BOSTON – Long considered an eyesore by some and a beloved bit of Boston's industrial past by others, the Northern Avenue bridge is finally coming down.

"It's a beautiful bridge and it's sad to see it go but infrastructure doesn't last forever, especially when it's made out of steel and iron that can easily rust," Bruce Berman, communications director for Save the Harbor, Save the Bay, said about the structure Friday. His comment came after City Hall formally pronounced a death sentence for the span.

A contract "for the safe removal of the bridge" will be implemented "shortly," the city said in a statement.

Yellow tape has blocked pedestrians from using the bridge, which provides an easy path to and from the Financial District's waterfront area and the Seaport District, for about a year, cutting off a

popular route between downtown and Fan Pier. In 1997, cars were banned from the span's planked decks, which can swing open laterally to let boats pass in and out of Fort Point Channel to Boston Harbor.

Built in 1908, the bridge helps to give the burgeoning Seaport District character, according to the Boston Preservation Alliance.

"The visual impact of the bridge – its steel trusses, and cross-bracing have become iconic and integral elements of Boston's waterfront and the Fort Point neighborhood," the alliance says on its website.

"The Seaport District, though successful in many ways, is lacking in character and personality," the group says. "The Northern Avenue Bridge serves as a literal gateway between the city's industrial past at Fort Point Channel and the Innovation

District. The bridge is more than a thoroughfare; it's a cultural experience that isn't replaceable by a YouTube clip."

After months of meetings last year, a group of environmentalists, preservationists and advocates for pedestrian and waterfront access agreed that preserving and restoring the old bridge was a better solution than replacement, according to the alliance. It said the city estimated the rehabilitation cost at as much as \$49 million.

Preservationist voices have been heard, according to the city, which said the span's distinctive iron and steel trusses are being moved to dry land "to maximize future preservation options, while dealing with the current public safety challenge."

U.S. Coast Guard officials warned last fall that the bridge could collapse into the channel, sparking a renewed effort to deal with the deteriorating span.

In his pitch to General Electric, which recently announced plans to relocate its corporate headquarters to the Seaport area, Mayor Marty Walsh sketched out plans to repair the bridge. The city suggested it would spend as much as \$100 million on the bridge, WCVB-TV reported.

"Over the past year the Mayor has listened to several stakeholders, preservation advocates and public safety officials and all options are still on the table for rebuilding the bridge," Bonnie McGilpin, a Walsh spokeswoman, said in the statement. The aim is to restore access for pedestrians, bicyclists and vehicles.

"We are currently determining the most cost-efficient option for the city that will best serve the resident and visitors of Boston," McGilpin said.

"I know there's people, that there are historic elements of it that we are preserving no matter what, but I think the real important thing to remember is that it's a critical connection," Berman said. "Whether you live in Boston and are going to the Seaport or whether you're working in the Seaport going downtown, that connection is critical."

Boston has another bridge in need of major repair, the North Washington Street span that connects Charlestown with the North End, Berman said.

Over the next several months, the city will create a public process for mapping out what to do about rebuilding the Northern Avenue Bridge, and will take into account the years of past public conversations on the subject, the City Hall statement said.

The preservation alliance says an earlier federal funding agreement for the nearby Moakley bridge requires extensive review for any plan that would adversely affect the Northern Avenue bridge.

"Clearly what is being proposed now – demolition of the Northern Avenue Bridge – will have an adverse effect," the alliance says. Yet that review process hasn't begun, it says.

"We appreciate the City's need to address safety concerns and efforts to keep a preservation solution on the table, but we are angered that the City didn't act a year ago to move forward with the clear preservation alternative that was enthusiastically supported by many diverse constituent groups," the alliance says. "If the City hadn't delayed action for decades, we wouldn't be in this situation."