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“We pay a lot of attention to historic resources that are threatened and endangered. And one of the most threatened, generally speaking historic resources not just in the Adirondack region, the Lake Champlain region, but across the state and across the whole country are historic bridges and that’s simply because they are exposed to the elements all the time and are pounded by weather and salt. They were often designed to carry loads and vehicles much smaller or [lighter] than exist today, and like a lot of things, they weren’t made to last forever. And so they are quickly disappearing from our landscape. And a community that still has its historic bridges has something really very special in it, and there are a number of communities in the region that have embraced these small bridges. There’s a stone arch bridge from 1843 in Keeseville [New York]. There’s the Bow Bridge in Hadley, which crosses the Sacandaga River, a covered bridge in Jay [New York] from 1857. And all of these are very much seen and held in great - - with great affection and esteem by the community. And I think the same is really true for the Lake Champlain Bridge. It’s been a major presence in the region for - - it was - - it had a major presence in the region for 80 years. It’s something that connected people’s lives together across New York and Vermont. The way it sat in that landscape and seemed to respond to the mountains around it and the lake over which it passed, was all - - over the years people built up a great deal of affection for it. And I think that’s why in anticipating its fate and ultimately its demise, it was very hard for people to take.

Innovative, sensitive engineering

There are a number of historic bridges throughout the region, throughout the country and often times they are small little local bridges. Vermont is famous for its covered bridges. Along the Ausable River here in New York State there are 15 historic bridges of several different types and - - but the Lake Champlain Bridge is really a bridge of a whole other magnitude, and that’s because it really - - as a work of engineering, it set a precedent that it was - - it was a new innovation in engineering and it set a precedent in a new kind of bridge design that was used all over the country to cross major bodies of water. And so for that and other reasons, it really has to be seen in a much - - as having a much higher level of significance than some of the other bridges that we’ve talked about. It really did deserve to become a national historic landmark, which is the highest federal designation for historic structures.

The [Lake Champlain] bridge was very sensitively designed and the designers really had in mind the bridge’s setting. Here you’ve got this dramatic location with Chimney Point in Vermont on one side and Crown Point Peninsula on the other side and then in the background the Green Mountains and the Adirondack Mountains and what is really an incredibly breathtaking setting there. And I think that was not lost on the designers and I think they asked themselves the question, how do we design a bridge that meets the functional requirements that we have - - that exist there, but how do we do something that is also respectful of the site and responds to the site? And in this design where

you've got these wonderful approach spans that all of a sudden leap into this arch in the center. It's just incredibly beautiful.

Well, several years ago when New York and Vermont began to look at this [Lake Champlain] crossing, they looked at a number of options for - - for addressing some what were - - would be, had become recognized as some fairly serious structural and condition problems there. And they looked at several options and one of them was to rehabilitate the existing bridge and there were several other options, variations on building a new bridge in various different ways and we were delighted that the states were looking at the option of rehabilitating the bridge. We championed that idea. And all the evidence at that point pointed to that was possible. Everybody knew that major work needed to be done on repairing, painting the truss work. We understood that the piers had some problems; that there were going to have to be some major reconstruction restoration work there, but there were a number of things that the rehabilitation had going for it and we thought that was a distinct possibility that that might happen. And so it wasn't really until these really serious structural issues became recognized that it changed from being a long planning process into the states went into a crisis mode and quickly made a decision to demolish and replace the bridge, and all of the other options then were off the table.

When I heard the news that the bridge was - - that the states had made the decision to demolish and replace the bridge, it was like getting stabbed in the chest. It just really felt like an old friend, a wonderful old friend had died or was about to die. And I know I am - - and I wasn't even someone that had used it every day that where it was intimately connected to my life, because it wasn't. But I had come through my study and appreciation to just understand that this was a really remarkable structure and also understood how important it was to the livelihoods of people in the region. And for days and days afterwards I got all kinds of phone calls from people saying did you hear we're going to lose it? It really felt like an old friend was about to die and it was...was sad and it was depressing.

Experiencing the 1929 bridge

I think that we all have an appreciation for beauty. I think it's just...and I think this was a beautiful structure, whether you understood that it was the first in the country for such and such kind of engineering and technology, you understood simply by looking at it that it was beautiful and that it was special. And it's also - - and if you also used it everyday to go to work or to take someone to the hospital or to visit relatives on the other side of the lake, you - - and you didn't simply just pass over it; you had to experience it both while you were crossing it and to be up there high looking out across the lake and the mountains in either direction, but you also had to get to it. And no matter whether you were coming there from Vermont or New York, you had to sort of wind your way to it and you would glimpse it here and you would glimpse it there and so it was something you couldn't ignore and it was just part of your experience of crossing the lake that was really special. Often time bridges are something that we - - we don't actually see them; we cross on top of them, they're underneath us often because a

lot of them are in fairly short spans and it's over very quickly. But the Lake Champlain Bridge, well from beginning to end sometimes might take five minutes to fully experience from seeing for the first time to leaving it behind in your rearview mirror. And so with that, between the beauty, the familiarity, the way you experience it, I think that people just took it into their - - into themselves in a way that's really - - that's really unusual.

I think you really have to look at the Lake Champlain Bridge in the same way that New Yorkers feel about the Brooklyn Bridge; it's there - - it's - - if you're anywhere near it, it has a presence and you can't ignore that. And then whether you're crossing the Brooklyn Bridge on foot or by car or whether you're just seeing it as you're passing near it, it's in your world; it's in your life. And I think the same thing is true about this bridge and it's a gem.

The new bridge

I think the departments of transportation have done a remarkable job in involving the public first in looking at options for addressing the - - the bridge there, and then second, in involving the public in - - in the design of the new bridge and through holding public meetings and posting things on their website they've been very open about hearing from the public. And this is in my experience fairly unprecedented and there's always a public input component to these kinds of public projects, but I think because this bridge was what it was, this structure for which people felt great affection and were very emotional, they realized that a whole other level of participation was warranted there. And they really did a great job of reaching out to the public and really hired an engineering firm with really first class designers who could try to do justice again to building a new bridge on the site.

In my mind there really isn't any way to truly replace the 1929 bridge. It was not quite one of a kind, but because it was the first of a kind, it was one of a kind. So there isn't any way to really replace it and we have forever lost a very important work of American civil engineering and there's just no getting around that. But the designers of the new bridge have tried to do a similar thing to what Spoffard and others in his firm did in designing of the 1929 bridge there, which was to design a bridge that responded to this remarkable setting and also responded to people's interest in having something that was really beautiful and remarkable there.

When I go out and speak in public quite a bit about architecture, bridges, historic preservation, and one of the things I often ask people who are in the audience is that the question of what are we doing today that people will look back on in 50 years and admire and appreciate? And unfortunately, a lot of what we're building today won't probably measure up very well because we're not - - we're not paying as close attention to design, to aesthetics. We're building things that don't often - - aren't built to last very long. And so our legacy unfortunately I think will not be - - will not be great. But I think that we probably will look back in 50 years at this - - the new Lake Champlain Bridge, and I suspect that over time the users and the community will develop an affection for

the bridge that will be - - which will make it quite special in the future too, and that's good.

I think one of the things I am actually most excited about the new bridge is - - as much as I hate to admit that is that I love the idea that people will be able to park on either side of the lake and walk out onto the new bridge or ride their bikes out onto the new bridge and will be able to use the bridge as a vantage point for seeing the lake, the mountains and the surrounding areas. And that was something - - that was one of the - - the things that we all wished with the 1929 bridge had had was that ability to slowly on foot and on bike to go out there and to pause there, because the site is really so remarkable. And now we'll have a way to truly be there in that very special location and enjoy it and that's a big plus of the new design.

I think if you look back on what the opening day was like in 1929, you'll see that it was a big, big deal; thousands of people attend, governors, all kinds of important people were there. The towns had made floats to be part of the parade. It was wonderful chaos and I think it's - - I'm trying to think of today how often does that kind of event take place for the opening of a bridge? It really just doesn't - - that kind of thing doesn't attract our attention so much anymore. But, so I expect that the opening of the new bridge later this year will probably attract a lot of people. I think there's a lot of pent up energy and interest about having a crossing back there. People want their lives back together. People want to feel like the region is whole again and that's what happened in losing the bridge is that the region was - - was cut in half. And I think we really realized maybe for the first time in a very tangible way that we're actually not New York and Vermont; we actually are - - we are of course New York and Vermont, but we are interconnected and the bridge is what connected us together. So I think people will rejoice in having that connection back. And I hope that people will enjoy that crossing in ways that they haven't been able to in the past by walking, riding their bikes and seeing it.

Hollywood discovers the bridge

Well I want to go on record as saying I don't think What Lies Beneath should be mentioned in this documentary. And we haven't talked about this either, but the bridge appears in the movie What Lies Beneath and it appears in several different ways. It's of course wonderful to get that kind of notoriety or that kind of publicity, but I'm not sure that it was worked into the story in such a way that it really - - I'm not sure it really did anything for the bridge. I think it was - - well in one case I think it's a backdrop to a sailing scene and then in the other case it's the finale of a car going off the bridge and crashing into the Lake? I don't think of that as a very good way to - - to remember the bridge.

We are a celebrity-obsessed culture so anytime we can connect something about ourselves to Harrison Ford or Michelle Pfeifer, wow we've really made it. And if that helps people to appreciate the Lake Champlain Bridge, that's great. I hope that the greater appreciation will come from recognizing it as a work of American civil engineering; it's importance as being an economic lifeline between New York and

Vermont. So a little movie reference I guess is okay.

Preserving historic bridges

Within the last 10 years New York State recognized that it was losing a lot of historic bridges for a variety of reasons. And so they decided to undertake a statewide inventory to identify the really important historic bridges in the state, and this they did. And then they drafted something called the New York State Historic Bridge Preservation Plan, which essentially made a very positive statement about the state's intention to treat these historic structures differently from other spans. And we were all tremendously excited by this initiative because we thought it meant that the state would take better care of their historic bridges. And the Lake Champlain Bridge appeared on that list; we thought that boded well for its preservation. And I think if all other conditions had been normal; if we hadn't had to go into a crisis mode, I hope that the state having a historic bridge preservation plan would have helped to make a case for its preservation. That's one thought.

I think just about everyone would admit that we are not taking good enough care of our highway infrastructure, whether we're talking about roads or bridges or other parts of that system. We just simply have - - there's tens of thousands of miles of roads and thousands and thousands of bridges to take care of and we are not spending enough money, we're not devoting enough resources to their care. And we are - - we need to do better. Everybody says we need to do better. And so what's happened is that there is a lot of deferred maintenance; that maintenance gets put off until there's a crisis or until there is something that really seems to be pressing. And so the care and maintenance of the Lake Champlain Bridge is really just - - reflects a greater problem, which is that we are not doing a good enough job to maintain structures like this. And we were concerned about the condition of the bridge for many, many years before the process ever started for looking at its repair or replacement. And anyone that used the bridge on an occasional basis or on a daily basis saw that there were problems. There was all kind of rust happening. There were joints that were failing. There was concrete that was falling off on the piers. And I know that people expressed to us concerns about this and I know we would periodically call DOT [New York State Department of Transportation] and just say what's going on? It appears there's a lot of work that needs to be done there. And so many people were aware that the bridge had some conditions - - condition problems long before it ever really came back into the public spotlight.

Taking care of our infrastructure

I would like to think that if we've learned something from this whole lesson it's that we need to take better care of things. Unfortunately that's an easy thing to say; someone could get up at a podium and could make that kind of commitment, but it's more - - it's not words that are required; it's money and resources that are required. And I think especially in this economy and the state of the state's finances and federal finances, I'm afraid that that problem is only going to get worse.

I'm really not in a position to second-guess the work of the engineers that regularly look at that bridge and other bridges in the region. But engineers by their nature really shouldn't be surprised. This is all - - it seems like most of the things are - when you're looking at a structure are knowable, whether you're looking at a super structure of the bridge, whether you're trying to assess what the conditions of the piers are; I think if you look hard enough and if you investigate deep enough, most of those things should be knowable.

I would like to see that the states rededicate themselves to (a) to taking care of our transportation infrastructure all the way across the boards, and to [b]also having just lost a national historic landmark eligible bridge, to rededicate themselves to preserving the very best historic bridges and other things in its domain. And that requires a new commitment of money and resources and maybe to stepping up the level of inspections and - - but I think it's all doable.

When I talk about the individuals and the groups that were interested in the future of the 1929 Lake Champlain Bridge, we're talking about a pretty wide spectrum of people in organizations. On the local level you've got people who use the bridge every day to get to work, to get to the hospital, visit friends on the other side of the lake; for them the bridge had a tremendous amount of importance and for many of them, they had great affection for the structure. Then you got historic preservation organizations like Adirondack Architectural Heritage, like the Preservation Trust of Vermont, like the Preservation League of New York State who recognized that this was a very important regional bridge structure, and they also weighed in on trying to encourage the rehabilitation of the bridge in various ways. But it also caught the attention of people at the national level; the National Trust for Historic Preservation had an interest in the project. Bridge historians and advocates like Eric Deloney who was the former Chief of the Historic American Engineering Record weighed in about the importance of the bridge and so it was this really very broad spectrum of people, organizations and agencies who - - who loved it, recognized its importance and were concerned about its future.

We are unfortunately a culture that likes to build things new and we're not very good at maintaining things. And one of the things I hope we have learned from the situation with the Lake Champlain Bridge region, and that I hope we're learning as a culture as we begin to address how to be - - how to operate in the new - - in the 21st Century in a kind of changing climate, in the biggest sense of the word is that we need to be better at taking care of things that we already - - that we already have. And there's a lot of evidence in the case of this bridge and other bridges that had we spent more money maintaining it over time, had we addressed some of the more major flaws with the original design somewhere along the way that not only would the bridge have lasted a great deal longer, but the cost of having the span there would have been significantly lower. So what I hope we learn from this is that if we spend more money with maintenance, we'll be spending less money in the long run on our infrastructure."