

For your information

April 26, 2010

TO: Mr. Joe Marty, Trustee, Village of Pelham
FROM: Roger Wines 31 Linden Ave. Pelham NY 10803
RE: Highbrook Avenue Bridge

Dear Mr. Marty –

Writing as a village resident and historian, I would like to submit a few observations on the future of the NYW&B bridge at Highbrook Avenue. It is not an easy problem to resolve, and I appreciate the efforts which you and your fellow Trustees are making to come to a solution.

THE Highbrook BRIDGE AS AN HISTORICAL LANDMARK

The Bridge has not been submitted for New York State and National Historic Landmark status, but it would be a worthy candidate for such an application. It represents an important aspect of Pelham's history. The New York, Westchester and Boston Railway helped to transform the neighborhoods of northern Pelham from rocky hills and woods into an agreeable, well established commuter suburb. Along with its neighboring New Haven Railroad lines, the Boston Westchester created modern Pelham.

The Bridge was constructed during 1911 by the New York, Westchester and Boston Railway, opened for service May 29, 1912, and was closed, following the bankruptcy of the railway, on December 31, 1937. Its architect was Alfred Fellheimer (1875-1959), a nationally well-known architectural engineer affiliated with Reed & Stem. He did some of the principal design work on Grand Central Terminal, was chief architect for the NYW&B, and later, with his partner Stuard Wagner, built major railroad stations at Utica NY, Buffalo NY and the magnificent Cleveland, Ohio art deco terminal..

Fellheimer's work on the NYW&B was remarkable, because he was asked to create not just one building, but all the structures of an entire railroad. These included stations, signal towers, repair shops and bridges. Using then popular Mediterranean styles, his work featured classical proportions, tile roofs, arched windows, tile and concrete structures with concrete stucco finish. Following financier J.P. Morgan's wish to create the finest possible electric commuter railroad, money was spent lavishly on construction and decoration. The Highbrook Avenue Bridge is a graceful structure, designed to enhance the neighborhood which would be built around it.. Most of his NYW&B work has vanished since 1937, but his Heathcote station in Scarsdale has recently been restored as a village historical landmark. His 180th st. Station in the Bronx, now part of the Transit Authority's Dyre Avenue line, is a National Historic Landmark..

The Bridge is a rare surviving example of Fellheimer's design at its best, and an important monument to the development of the village community of Pelham.

THE Highbrook Avenue Bridge as a Work of Public Art

Even the casual passer-by is struck by its large size, and its graceful lines. The Bridge is fitted diagonally to the street, but the curve of the arch, the strong pilasters to either side, and the graceful wings blending into the raised railroad embankment leave it facing straight toward an observer. Best seen from the southern side, it opens up into a broad, informal plaza, created by the intersection of several streets. Substantial private residences, artfully fitted on corner lots, combine to create a striking architectural group. The whole setting forms a well-preserved group of early 20th century suburban structures, of which the Bridge is the centerpiece. Remove the Bridge and the unity falls apart: there are just a few streets with nice houses.

Pelham is sparsely endowed with public art. A few little war memorials, a fireman's memorial, a clock tower. A few churches. . We should pay more attention to, and appreciate better the beauty of Fellheimer's great arch. It is the largest free-standing sculpture in Pelham. It is an ideal centerpiece for a small park.

Of course, the Bridge has seen the ravages of 99 years, and needs restoration to have its beauty fully appreciated. But the mass, lines, and proportions indicate how well it was designed.

THE Bridge as a Park

Work has been done and is being done about creating a park on ground level, and above, on the Bridge and the old railroad right of way. Many creative possibilities for a multi-use "High Park" exist. I merely mention this as a reason for preserving and reusing the old railroad bridge.

Mention has been made of the pollution issue. This is not a major polluted industrial site. Some slight contamination from creosote ties and a little dripped oil can be found on all old railroad beds. The NYW&B was an exceptionally clean, electrically operated railroad. The old gravel ballast would have to be removed regardless of how the area is redeveloped, and new topsoil and paving installed, so this problem should not inhibit consideration of reusing the Bridge.

THE COST

Along with all the positive aspects of the Bridge as an historical landmark, an artistic monument, and a neighborhood park, comes the problem of paying for these advantages.

I have gone through the Berger-Lehmann report. It appears to be thoroughly done, but some of its findings should be closely reexamined.

For example would competitive bidding produce lower cost estimates for the renewal of the concrete? Are there different methods and techniques to be considered?

The report proposes that the Bridge would have to have major repairs every twenty years. The present structure managed to survive a century with no maintenance at all. Using today's improved materials, and with a bit of care, repairing small future cracks before they become major damage, it would be reasonable to expect a repaired Bridge to last another century. This needs a closer look..

Berger- Lehmann estimates it would cost \$ 2.2 million to restore the Bridge and \$700,000 to demolish it. (Not counting the additional cost of building new embankments to support a park on the west side) So, we are talking about a cost of \$1,500 000 additional to retain the bridge, over demolishing it.

If we expect the Bridge to last another 100 years, as it has already, that \$1,500,000 averages out to \$15,000 a year. Is \$15,000 a year too much to spend to preserve such a monument, and to make it part of our community's future?

Restoration could be done in stages, and the cost spread over several fiscal years. The arch over the avenue, the south front, the north front, the upper level, the park, can all be done in separate contracts. Perhaps the Board should think in terms of a Five Year Plan.

The outlook presently is bleak for grants, but in the next few years, private and governmental sources will gradually become more available. Parts of the Bridge-Park project may be fundable from different outside sources.

THE CHOICE BEFORE THE BOARD

Personally, I would like to see the Bridge saved, if it is at all possible, and even if it costs us all a little bit more in taxes. I hope you can figure out a clever way to do it.

Past generations of Pelham residents sacrificed, made extra financial efforts in their time, to create the institutions we enjoy today: our four elementary schools, our high school, athletic fields, small neighborhood parks, utilitarian structures like town and village halls, firehouses. They were taking care, not only of their own immediate needs, but they did it for us.

Should we, today, do no less for our children and grandchildren?.

When considering the future of the Bridge, I urge the Board to consider not only the immediate short term financial circumstances, but also the large view and the long view.

Respectfully submitted,

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