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River Fields Urges Metro to Open Harrods Creek Bridge

City Has Not Received Necessary Approvals To Begin Construction of Two-Lane Expansion

Louisville, Ky. --(May 18, 2009)—River Fields, a 50-year-old land and river conservation/preservation group, disagrees with Metro Public Works' announcement that construction of the Harrods Creek Bridge widening project can begin soon, and once again urges Metro Public Works to re-open the Harrods Creek Bridge immediately, to give commuters, businesses and residents relief from dangerous, environmentally-harmful traffic backups and declining retail sales.

The City has not submitted its construction staging plans nor applied for the necessary state and federal approvals for construction staging plans to widen the bridge to two lanes. Although the construction contract has now been awarded, construction cannot start until these plans, reviews and approvals are complete.

According to Don Cox, an attorney and spokesperson for River Fields, "Once again the City is making claims to the public that ignore the realities of what remains to be done. Public Works' leadership has promised to open this bridge for six months. Metro must obtain these approvals before construction can begin. Construction staging plans must be evaluated very carefully because of the historic properties surrounding the bridge."

"After the plan is submitted it must be reviewed by the Kentucky Heritage Council staff and approved by the State Historic Preservation Officer," said Cox. Following that, the Eighth District Office of the U.S. Coast Guard in St. Louis must review and approve the staging plans to protect navigation safety and access. This will take time."

“It is time that Metro make the necessary repairs and open the bridge, particularly this summer, when both boat and vehicle traffic are at its peak,” he continued. “Otherwise, area businesses, commuters and residents will continue to unnecessarily suffer economic harm and inconvenience.”

The Harrods Creek Bridge is Structurally Sound

A structural engineer and national expert in the preservation of historic bridges, Gary Klein, with the Chicago-based engineering firm of Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc., was hired by River Fields recently, to conduct a thorough structural evaluation of the bridge. He declared the structure as “robust” and if repaired, could be opened immediately at less than half the cost of the proposed widening.

“The arches and spandrel walls remain generally sound,” said Klein. “The interior portions are in good condition, and there is no indication of foundation movement related to scour of the stream bed. Furthermore, arches are perhaps the most robust structural system known to man. Arches built more than two millennia ago still exist. Given their inherent strength and stability, there is no question that the arches of the Harrods Creek Bridge have sufficient capacity to carry truck loads up to the legal limit.”

“So instead of the City spending a few thousand dollars to repair the bridge, businesses and commuters are shouldering the costs,” said Dr. Hiram Polk, a member of the River Fields Board of Trustees. “Recently, a fatal accident in Prospect halted all access on U.S. 42, highlighting the importance of keeping the Harrods Creek Bridge open. In our opinion, the solution is very clear: open the bridge until construction begins. ”

Approvals Not Related to Lawsuit

Cox said the completion of these construction plans and approvals has nothing to do with the lawsuit filed by River Fields and its four co-plaintiffs. “Plan review and approval is part of the regulatory process that must happen with or without a lawsuit,” he said.

In the short-term, River Fields believes Metro should fix the guardrails and open the bridge. This solution was approved by the Historic Preservation Office in January and is the most effective way to get traffic rolling again immediately.

Longer-term, River Fields and four community co-plaintiffs, The Harrods Creek Boat Owners Association, OPEN Louisville, the River Creek Homeowners Association and the Wolf Pen Branch Preservation Association have advocated for a preservation option—repairing the guardrails, improving signage and opening the bridge as quickly as possible. According to Klein, this practical solution is safe and is the fastest and most cost-effective solution and provides immediate relief to commuters and Prospect and Harrods Creek businesses.

“We have a nationally renowned expert saying there is no reason this bridge could not be opened immediately with minor repairs,” said Dr. Polk. “Commuters and businesses, especially restaurants, are suffering needlessly.”

Since the bridge closed on Thanksgiving Eve, many drivers have added up to an hour to their daily commute and some Harrods Creek businesses are experiencing as much as a 70% decline in sales. The structure would be closed at a minimum for six to seven months when, and if, the construction process for two-lane expansion finally begins.

For more information about the Harrods Creek Bridge and the facts surrounding the widening, go to www.riverfields.org/hcb.htm.

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River Fields is the largest and oldest river conservancy along the 981- mile Ohio River. For 50 years, River Fields has utilized its resources to effectively protect, preserve and enhance the natural and cultural resources of the land and water around the Ohio River in our region. Through its programs of land conservation, advocacy, and education, River Fields strives to create harmony between nature, history and the people who live here. River Fields owns land or holds conservation easements on 34 properties, totaling more than 2,200 acres, most of which is preserved forever. River Fields is one of the nation's few land trusts tackling regional advocacy work and land conservation.