



Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct, Inc.

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High Bridge Comments

“Every resident of the city knows where High Bridge is, no matter how dense his ignorance may be as to other points of the water-service.” – Scribner’s Monthly, 1877

Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct is a private, non-profit, all-volunteer organization devoted to all aspects of the original Croton Aqueduct in Westchester County and New York City: the physical water tunnel itself with its associated structures – most famously the High Bridge – as well as the walking path on top of the aqueduct. We have grouped our comments into three broad categories, allowing for inevitable overlaps and some points that touch on programming.

The Old Croton Aqueduct is a National Historic Landmark, the highest level of federal landmark designation. The High Bridge is part of this NHL designation and is listed on the National Register in addition to being a New York City landmark. To the maximum extent possible the bridge’s restoration should be appropriate to its historic character. Changes should be kept to the least intervention required for public safety and use in order to avoid or minimize any adverse effects.

We stress the importance of retaining the **crown** - the moderate upcurve of the deck surface along its centerline. The bridge surface was visibly crowned even before the 1860-61 enlargement during which the walking surface was paved. The crown is not just in the surface materials. It reflects the concrete roof arch of the pipe gallery beneath, a subtle yet unmistakable indication of the presence of the large pipe still directly beneath the deck. We understand that while the side slope of the deck may seem minor to pedestrians, it may not conform to guidelines for new structures. Correcting this could require major modifications to the historic concrete roof arch, brick paving, and parapets, all highly significant features of the bridge. We hope the design team will be given flexibility to address these concerns in a way that keeps the crown as a telling feature of the bridge without requiring adverse changes.

We also urge that the **bricks** that now make up the pavement of the deck be reused and relaid in their present pattern, and that matching bricks be procured for any units that require replacement. The dark bricks date from the 1860s; their age is an inherent part of the bridge’s character. The red brick over the central span reflects the bridge’s evolution when five of the original 15 stone arches were replaced with a steel span over the river, the result of an important controversy that saved the bridge from demolition in the 1920s.

The bridge’s **railings** require major design attention for several reasons. The original railings are critical to the bridge’s appearance when the bridge is viewed both from the walkway and from a

distance. These beautiful railings were part of the bridge's early history and are a design reference to the arches of the 1848 bridge. It is also important for visitors to have an experience as wide open – “uncaged” - as possible. While the need for physical security is undisputed, the addition of a standard cage would be an unacceptable adverse effect and a sad outcome for this project.

Railings for the restored bridge are perhaps the greatest challenge for the design team. The process should include development of alternatives, and we strongly recommend that full scale mock-ups be installed to simulate alternatives, in addition to graphic depictions. We support, of course, the restoration and reinstallation of the historic railings as a necessary part of any solution. The design team will undoubtedly research examples of railings from other high pedestrian walkways for consideration. (The railings on Walkway over the Hudson, almost twice as high as the High Bridge, are 54” where the deck is above the Hudson River.) We support seeking railing concepts from structures elsewhere in the U.S. and in other countries.

There are many additional issues related to the bridge's landmark status, including lighting, ramps, gates, and placement of signage and furnishings (for example, seating) that we anticipate will be addressed as part of the Section 106 process. We are requesting consulting party status in order to participate as city, state, and federal authorities consider these issues.

The bridge should be designed principally as a public space and destination, not simply as a crossing - a way to get from one end to the other. This view is well supported by the bridge's history: it was built high to be a civic monument and attracted throngs of tourists from the outset. Today, “See you on the High Bridge!” is one of the High Bridge Coalition slogans. The High Bridge is a natural place to want to be.

It is often remarked that if all the good ideas of what to put in Central Park had been carried out, the park itself would have been nearly obliterated. High Bridge could be similarly at risk. The excitement over its restoration and reopening, in which we totally share, has released a flood of ideas – each perhaps worthy in itself – for what to have there. Yet the bridge's future may best be served by keeping it **an open, uncluttered space** to the greatest degree possible. Doing so would allow freedom of movement for the most number of people, would keep the bridge flexible for events and programming, and, one hopes, would keep maintenance costs down.

To maximize freedom of pedestrian movement, one of the delights of being on the bridge, we urge the city to **require that bikes be walked across**. The bridge is only about a quarter-mile long, and according to one of the consultants takes some five to seven minutes to walk across. Bikers who need to cross the river more quickly have the Washington Bridge close at hand. Moreover, the bridge deck is only about 17 feet wide. Having two five-foot-wide lanes down the center for bike traffic, one in each direction, would leave a miniscule three and a half feet on either side to accommodate all pedestrians, negating the whole idea of a pedestrian bridge. The narrow width of the walkway gives it an intimate feel. This is a unique feature, not an obstacle.

The principle of the bridge as a public space where bikes are walked fits comfortably with its contemporary role as a key link in the **Old Croton Aqueduct Greenway**. Greenway users, both

hikers and bikers, will likely want to pause when they reach the bridge to enjoy the unique setting and take in the views. This is part of the greenway experience.

The bridge has a high symbolic value. The presence of water pipes beneath the deck speaks volumes about the beginning of one of the world's great municipal water supplies. This is a story that never fails to engage an audience and that can serve to draw attention to the water supply issues facing the city and the world today.

We hope that **the pipe chamber** beneath the deck of the bridge – the “attic” - can be made accessible to the public, at least visually and with appropriate lighting, so that the 90.5-inch pipe installed in 1862 and the extant remnants of the two 1848 36-inch pipes are clearly discernable. Being able to see them would add an entirely new dimension to the bridge experience. Nothing could make clearer why the bridge was built, what it took to bring water to Manhattan from the mainland, and why the bridge was so crucial to the life of the city for so long. We also urge that the feasibility of controlled visits to the interior of the attic using the door at the Bronx end of the bridge be investigated. Such visits would be comparable to those conducted at the Croton Aqueduct weir in Ossining and at High Bridge Tower.

Interpretive signage about the original Croton Aqueduct, the bridge itself, the High Service Works, and the Croton system overall, still in service today, is assumed to be part of the design plan. Perhaps examples can be shown of the dozens (hundreds?) of paintings and photographs that have the bridge as their subject, and excerpts of oral histories made available. Perhaps one of the two gatehouses can be made into a mini-visitor center. Several brief signs might be mounted on the bridge railings, with longer signs installed near the Bronx and Manhattan entrances to the bridge.

Although the gatehouse interiors are not within the scope of this project, we hope an overall plan can be developed that includes all components of the bridge.

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