

Chance to Turn Twin Spans into Public Pier Slipping Away

Guest editorial by Richard Campanella, published in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, June 11, 2010

While our attention has been rightfully focused on the environmental damages of the BP oil disaster, the opportunity to create a major metropolitan asset to enjoy our coastal environment is slipping away. It involves the creative reuse of the old Interstate-10 Twin Spans.

Heroic engineering reopened the surge-damaged Twin Spans within a few months of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Since then, the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development (DOTD) and its contractors designed and built higher, stronger, wider replacement spans—the largest single public-works project in Louisiana history, costing \$803 million. As motorists switched permanently to the new bridges this spring, the question of what to do with the old Twin Spans came into the public discourse.

DOTD currently plans to demolish most of these two 5.4-mile-long corridors of concrete. Nearly 80 percent of their 814 sections will be used to protect the shoreline of Lake Borgne and Bayou Sauvage. Another 13 percent will be used to create reefs in Lake Pontchartrain. Most of the remaining sections—those nearest Slidell—will be preserved as public recreational piers for St. Tammany Parish.

Good uses all, but might there be a better allocation?

Consider, for example, converting one entire span for public recreational use—a five-mile linear waterfront park for walking, biking, and outdoor activities. Practically unique in the nation, this pedestrian bridge would also provide fine fishing and crabbing access for folks without boats. It would create an eco-tourism destination in both eastern Orleans and St. Tammany parishes that could be marketed with adjacent attractions such as Bayou Sauvage National Wildlife Refuge, Fort Pike State Historic Site, and whatever becomes of the former Six Flags amusement park. It could create commercial opportunities for concessions at either terminus. It would offer outdoor exercise options for an urban population suffering high rates of obesity. Preserving a span might even provide a small level of resistance against storm-induced gulf surges. And it would still leave the other span to be demolished and recycled as reef and shoreline-protection material.

Recently, DOTD hired a consulting firm to determine the feasibility of this idea. The engineers envisioned building visitor facilities and parking at both the Orleans and St. Tammany parish trailheads. The bridge itself (namely the eastbound span) would be partitioned into a pedestrian walkway with rest areas, a bicycle path and emergency vehicle lane, and a fishing/outlook pier utilizing certain sections of the westbound lane, accessed by crossovers. Shelters, seating, lighting, railing, emergency phones, lane stripes, and other necessities would be added.

What soured DOTD on the idea was the price tag: \$44 million, over four times more than estimated demolition costs. The agency has since gone on record claiming that preserving a span would impede marine navigation and incur high repair and inspection costs. It also cited a “commitment” made to the federal government that the state would demolish the old spans while the feds financed the new construction.

I am not in a position to critique those claims or cost figures, but I can point out that DOTD did not investigate the *benefits* that such an asset would bring to the region and state—direct economic gains as well as hard-to-measure but just-as-important social benefits. Even the best ideas look bad when

costs are tabulated but benefits are ignored. Citizens and local leaders should call upon DOTD to expand their cost study to a full cost/benefit analysis.

If such a study determines that costs are still prohibitively high, then we should consider a way to reduce them: by preserving only a limited section anchored to Orleans Parish's soil, rather than the full five miles. That is exactly what St. Tammany Parish is doing at its end. Converting a half-mile or so at the city's end would create a great recreational destination in eastern Orleans Parish for a minimal monetary outlay. It cost St. Tammany Parish all of \$17,100 to purchase two stretches for its pier project.

With either project, New Orleanians would be able to walk, jog, bike, fish, crab, and enjoy spectacular vistas of wetlands, water, and birdlife in a manner that is impossible with existing infrastructure. The public pier park could also be fashioned into a city Welcome Center, this being the first ingress into New Orleans for thousands of westbound motorists daily. The pier park might also accommodate special events such as running and biking races, family reunions, festivals, fishing rodeos, or outdoor art displays involving community participation. City planners could leverage this asset into additional creative ideas for the public good, which outside organizations might be interested in funding.

The BP gulf oil disaster has given us reason to appreciate the coastal environments that we all too often take for granted. Large-scale public access to those natural resources gained by the creative reuse of the Twin Spans would help foster that appreciation.

Most appealing about this idea is the fact that, unlike all those great structural projects contemplated in the sundry planning documents of the past five years, this one already exists.

But not for long. Demolition starts this autumn.

Richard Campanella, a geographer with Tulane's Center for Bioenvironmental Research, is the author of "Bienville's Dilemma," "Geographies of New Orleans," and other books. He may be reached at rcampane@tulane.edu.