

Plan Proceeds to Build Suicide Barriers on Cold Spring Canyon Bridge



Santa Barbara, Calif.—Erected in 1963, the Cold Spring Canyon Arch Bridge is a 1,200-foot-long bridge in the Santa Inez Mountains along a Designated State Scenic Highway. Known for its scenic vistas and great architectural beauty, the bridge is also the site of many suicides. On average, one person a year has jumped from the bridge. No one has ever survived the 400-foot drop into the canyon below. Four people jumped in last year.

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) maintains the state-owned bridge. It is planning on building suicide barriers on both sides of the bridge. The barriers would be six-foot high steel fences curving inward at the top.

The plan came after years of investigation and public hearings. Caltrans formed a special task force to find out what could prevent suicides on the bridge. In addition to Caltrans, task force members included police agencies, emergency services, local government agencies and elected officials, and professionals in suicide prevention.

At public hearings, opponents argued that barriers will not prevent suicides, because people will simply go somewhere else or try a different way to kill themselves. They said the barriers were suitable to bridge over a city freeway, not a beautiful natural setting. Opponents see the barriers as wasting taxpayers' dollars. Caltrans initially projected the cost at less than \$1 million. The latest estimate is \$3.2 million. Groups opposing the barriers include taxpayer and environmental groups and also Friends of the Bridge (a citizens' group formed to oppose the barriers).

Supporters of the barrier counter that people who commit suicide are torn about whether they want to live or die, and suicide is often an impulsive act. They say that if a person is stopped from their impulsive act, the person often will not go somewhere else to commit suicide. They cite the case of two neighboring bridges in Washington, D.C. A suicide barrier was erected on one, ending suicides from it. No barrier was erected on the other bridge, but no increase in suicides has occurred on it.

Supporters further point out that rescuers endanger themselves on the bridge. The Sheriff's Department has responded to about 160 incidents on the bridge in the last eight years.

The barriers have many supporters. Among them are the agencies on the task force, mental health groups, and Stop the Tragedy (a citizens' group formed to support the barriers).

Funding for the barriers will come from state and federal highway money as part of Caltrans' Safety Improvement Program. This program aims to "reduce the number and severity of accidents on the State's highway system by implementing safety improvements to existing roadways." The Cold Spring Canyon Bridge has the highest concentration of fatalities in Caltrans District 5. The final decision on the barriers rests with Caltrans. If the project is approved, opponents threaten legal action to stop it.

Random Student Drug Testing Adopted at Hackettstown High

Hackettstown, N.J.—To combat the threat of drug use among students, the Hackettstown Board of Education adopted Random Student Drug Testing (RSDT). The RSDT policy is directed at the district’s only high school, Hackettstown High School. RSDT affects about three-quarters of the student body. It applies to students who are engaged in athletics, take part in extracurricular activities, or have campus parking permits. These students must return a form signed by their parents consenting to random drug tests. Students who do not consent to the tests may not participate in athletics or student clubs or park their cars at school.

Few students are actually tested. Each week, a computer randomly selects about six students, who are summoned to the guidance office. From there, a counselor takes students to the nurse’s office where they supply a urine sample. The sample is tested immediately. If positive, it is sent to a medical lab to verify the results.

Then the principal notifies the parents. The student will be removed from athletics, extracurricular activities, and parking at school and may not return to these until passing a subsequent drug test. The student must also undergo counseling and a treatment program. Everything is done in confidence, and the school does not notify the police.

The federal No Child Left Behind Act authorizes spending federal education funds on random student drug testing. About 7 percent of public schools across the nation have adopted random drug testing.

The purpose of the program, according to a school counselor, is “to deter, delay and detect use.” So far, she reports, it has worked. In the first three years, only two students have tested positive for drug use. The costs of the program are relatively low. The initial screening costs \$18 and a verification costs another \$25. The school pays about \$3,000 per year for RSDT.

Drug-testing programs often face legal challenges. But two recent U.S. Supreme Court cases have ruled that programs similar to RSDT do not violate the Fourth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. In some states, these programs have been challenged as violating the state’s constitution. In Washington state, for example, the state’s highest court ruled that the state’s Constitution did not allow random drug testing. A similar challenge was rejected in New Jersey, where Hackettstown High is located. The New Jersey Supreme Court ruled that students have a lesser expectation of privacy at schools and that properly conducted testing may be done.

In Hackettstown, many parents, members of the community, and school officials support the drug testing program. Opposition, however, comes from some parents and students. They think it invades students’ privacy, makes them less trusting of parents and the school, and does not work. One student stated: “There were some kids who just switched to drinking. And some kids drank to rebel, because they were upset about the tests. Kind of like, ‘Oh yeah? We’ll show you!’ ”

More Streetlights Needed to Curb Crime

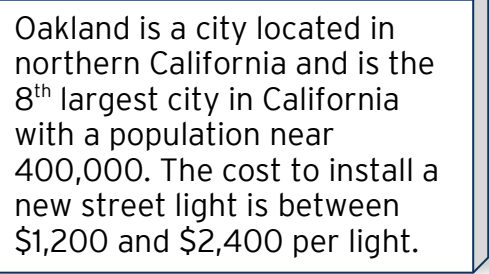
Oakland, CA—To combat the growing crime problem in Oakland, city officials are considering increasing lighting in high crime areas.

Estimates show crime in Oakland is on the rise and has increased 25 percent since the same period the previous year. The current lack of lighting is not accidental; it's a response to a California law imposing energy efficiency standards on outdoor lighting. The law requires cities to begin using energy efficient bulbs and "cap" new lampposts to prevent light from flooding into the sky. Oakland immediately responded to the law by imposing restrictions on 37,000 streetlights within the city limits.

The purpose of the law is to conserve energy and reduce excessive illumination and glare. But Oakland residents are now seeing a spike in crime. Oakland's Assistant Police Chief Howard Jordan wants temporary lighting increases in crime hot spots. Supporters of the new policy argue criminals are attracted to the dark. They don't want to be seen, and when it's dark, they can hide their criminal activities. Supporters also refer to research that links poor lighting and crime.

However, not everyone is in favor of more lighting. L. Norwood of Oakland says her street is quiet and thinks the city should spend the money on other priorities such as repairing streets and sidewalks. Local astronomers and stargazers are also against more street lighting within the city limits. They argue bright street lights cause light pollution and create sky glow that inhibits visibility of stars and changes the whole character of the night sky.

Furthermore, those against increasing street lighting contend there is an economic incentive to keep lights dim. Street lighting can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to maintain. Oakland is currently facing a \$76 million budget shortfall, and public works officials say the city cannot afford new lighting.



Oakland is a city located in northern California and is the 8th largest city in California with a population near 400,000. The cost to install a new street light is between \$1,200 and \$2,400 per light.

Nonetheless, Oakland's City Council is considering a proposal by Vice Mayor Desley Brooks to increase lighting in high crime areas. To address the city's financial problems, she is looking into low-cost lighting options and ways to subsidize new light poles in high crime areas. The vice mayor insists that public safety is of the outmost importance and outweighs any financial concerns.

Lead-Testing Requirement Delayed

Washington—The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) announced that a new lead-testing requirement will be delayed and Congress passed the Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act. Among other things, the law limits the amount of lead allowed in children’s products.

Lead is highly toxic and poses great danger to children. Lead poisoning can harm nerve development, cause brain and kidney damage, and even result in death.

For many years, lead has been banned in house paint and paint on toys. Manufacturers long ago agreed to remove it from toys. Recently, however, lead has been discovered in children’s products, many (but not all) manufactured in China. Highly publicized product recalls resulted. An estimated 30 million toys and 15 million other children’s products were recalled in last year alone. This crisis prompted Congress to investigate the problem and pass the new law.

The act requires manufacturers, importers, and stores to remove lead from products made for children age 12 and younger (clothing, toys, books, games, etc.). It further requires them to prove that the products have been tested for lead content. The law also gives CPSC the power to issue regulations to enforce and clarify the law. Violators of the law can receive civil and criminal penalties.

Created by Congress in 1972, CPSC is an independent agency with the mission of protecting the public “against unreasonable risks of injuries associated with consumer products.” About 400 employees work at CPSC.

The law’s testing requirement was to begin last year. But CPSC received complaints about the high cost of testing. Thrift stores and people making handmade products for children expressed doubt that they could comply with the law. One protester even set up a web site called National Bankruptcy Day. It referred to the deadline as the day many small businesses would go under. Many libraries also voiced concerns that they would have to remove all children’s books from their shelves.

CPSC posted guidelines on the law. It exempted thrift stores from testing. It also exempted testing products with no history of lead contamination, such as cotton clothing and children’s books made after 1985. Most important, it delayed all testing for a few years.

Those supporting the delay include groups representing toy stores, makers of handmade toys and children’s products, and clothing companies. None favors getting rid of the law entirely. But a columnist for *Forbes*, a business magazine, called for its repeal or drastic revision. He argued that “although it is surely useful to ban lead in paint on toys, in this case the risk was not sufficient to justify a major emergency bill with ill-thought-out and costly provisions.”

Environmental, children’s health, and consumer groups oppose the delay. An environmental consultant said: “Try telling a mother whose child was poisoned by a toy containing lead that we need another year to figure this out.”