

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.