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Old Bay Bridge piers to be reused as public boardwalk, vista points

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Several piers remaining from the old eastern span of the original Bay Bridge will be reused as a vista point and boardwalk at Yerba Buena Island and Oakland. (Courtesy Caltrans)

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Four piers from the eastern span of the old Bay Bridge will live on as a public boardwalk and vista point in Oakland and on Yerba Buena Island.

Hailed as a “once-in-100-years opportunity” to give the public access to bay waters, transportation officials agreed earlier this week to save the piers from demolition. On the Oakland side, the piers will be reused as part of a larger park project that has long been planned as part of the redevelopment of the Bay Bridge.

“This park will be an international destination because it’s one of the few places you can actually get out into the bay,” said East Bay Regional Parks General Manager Bob Doyle. “You’ve got the port ships coming right by to watch, and the ferries used to come from this spot, so it’s got a lot of transportation history that’s really incredible.”

The piers could open as early as the end of this year.

The \$52 million project will cost slightly more than demolishing the piers, an incremental expense on an already pricey project that will yield big benefits, said Steve Heminger, executive director of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, the Bay Area’s regional transportation planner. Heminger sits on the three-person Toll Bridge Oversight Committee, which has overseen the Bay Bridge project since 2005. The bridge was rebuilt following the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

“The majority of the members on the commission, we decided it was really worth the trade-off,” Heminger said. “Even though on balance, you’re paying slightly more, you’re getting a pretty significant amenity out of it.”



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The budget for the \$6 billion reconstruction of the eastern span ballooned wildly over the nearly two decades it was designed and constructed. And, there’s still a \$30 million shortfall for remaining work looming. But, Heminger said that’s a lot better than the roughly \$50 million shortfall initially forecast, and he’s confident staff will find other ways to cut costs before the budget is balanced.

That wasn’t good enough for Susan Bransen, another member of the committee and the executive director of the California Transportation Commission. She voted against the pier boardwalk project, which she said would add another \$19 million to the projected funding shortfall.

“If this proposal had been in line with our existing budget, I would have voted for its approval,” she said via email. “However, as we are tasked with being good stewards of taxpayer dollars, I could not vote to spend money we don’t have.”

On Yerba Buena Island, the pier sits below the landing of the new bicycle and pedestrian path that extends from Oakland in the East Bay, and Heminger said there are plans to add a cafe in the WWII-era building adjacent to the pier.

On the Oakland side, the committee decided to keep three of the five remaining piers but demolish the two farthest out. It was too expensive to build the boardwalk out to the fifth pier, according to a staff report, and provide ongoing maintenance.



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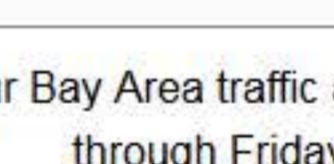
Doyle said the East Bay parks district has agreed to take over maintenance for the new boardwalk, with ongoing financial support from toll funds. The district is also designing a new “Gateway Park” that will extend from a historic building — a former rail car repair shop — to the new boardwalk. The district in December signed a 10-year-lease for the 1930s-era building. The structure will now serve as a visitors center and venue for conferences or other gatherings, he said.

In between the building and planned boardwalk are 21 acres of land that will be transformed into picnic, open space and seating areas, Doyle said. He also envisions a cafe or concession stand for park visitors, along with bicycle and pedestrian trails.

“It’ll be a great place for people to spend a day,” he said. “It’s a really unique opportunity, and we’re extremely excited about it.”

Doyle expects the district will release an environmental impact review for Gateway Park in the coming weeks. The district is still waiting on the U.S. Army to finish cleaning up parts of contaminated soil that will make up roughly half the park, he said, so it’s unclear when it will be fully completed.

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Erin Baldassari Erin Baldassari covers transportation, the Bay Area’s housing shortage and breaking news. She served on the East Bay Times’ 2017 Pulitzer Prize winning team for its coverage of the Ghost Ship fire. But most of all, she cares deeply about local news and hopes you do, too. If you’d like to support local journalism, please subscribe today.

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