

Folsom bridge squeaks by panel

By David Whitney -- Bee Washington Bureau

Published June 12, 2003

WASHINGTON -- A House committee narrowly approved legislation Wednesday directing the federal Bureau of Reclamation to build a two-lane bridge over the American River below Folsom Dam, but that may be as far as it goes for a second year.

Last year similar legislation was approved by the House Resources Committee, but the full House never took it up.

Little has changed since then except for the need. Citing national security concerns, the bureau closed the narrow road on top of the 50-year-old dam in February, blocking an estimated 18,000 cars a day from a popular commuter route.

Building a new bridge is so closely entangled in the congressional stalemate over flood control and a proposed multipurpose dam at Auburn, however, that it has become a kind of proxy for that fight.

The bill approved Wednesday attempts to separate the bridge from the larger battle, but the 22-to-20 vote along party lines was a clear indication that the frustration motorists feel has not altered the political landscape.

"One hurdle down, and we're onto the House floor, if we can," said Rep. Doug Ose, R-Sacramento, who sponsored the bill with Rocklin Republican John Doolittle.

Doolittle is the lead champion for a new Auburn dam as the best alternative for protecting Sacramento from American River flooding.

But Rep. Bob Matsui, D-Sacramento, wants to add another 7 feet to the height of Folsom Dam to give downstream areas the level of protection advocated by the Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency and City of Sacramento leaders.

Matsui has introduced a bill authorizing the Folsom Dam addition, including a new bridge over the American River. But Doolittle, a member of the Republican leadership, has the Sacramento flood control legislation so bottled up that it is threatening the completion of work to strengthen the levees.

It is in that context that a new bridge is problematic without some breakthrough. Matsui, a leader among House Democrats, and Doolittle have enough sway in Congress to effectively hold each other in check.

After the committee vote, Doolittle said he hoped area congressmen would support the legislation "given that it is now clear that our bill is moving forward and the other is standing still."

But Matsui's office condemned the vote, saying the version approved by the panel would cost Folsom millions of dollars more.

Rep. Ken Calvert, R-Corona, proposed a compromise that would have the Bureau of Reclamation paying up to \$50 million for a two-lane bridge. If Folsom wants a wider four-lane bridge, the city would have to come up with a 20 percent match.

"I view a four-lane bridge as an absolute necessity," said Folsom City Councilman Jeff Starsky. "I am a little concerned where we will come up with the money."

But Councilman Andy Morin said the money would be found. "To have that significant portion earmarked, we can get the rest of the way," he said.

Critics, who included all of the committee Democrats, charged that the Bureau of Reclamation shouldn't be in the business of building bridges. Rep. Nick Rahall of West Virginia, the senior Democrat on the resources committee, called it a "highway project bill."

He said if the cost of the bridge comes out of the Bureau of Reclamation's pocket, it would wipe out a third of the agency's budget for water projects.

Afterward, Matsui's press aide, Jared Allen, said that because of the way the cost-share provision is written, the Ose-Doolittle approach would cost Folsom as much as \$13 million while the Matsui legislation, linked to authorization of the dam raise, would cost the city \$5 million for the same bridge.

Even if the legislation should get out of the House, it is virtually certain to die in the Senate. The state's two Democratic senators, Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer, have introduced the Matsui bill and are staunch opponents of an Auburn dam.