
Ever wonder why the Henderson Bridge is a freeway?

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I guess we're a little obsessed with the Henderson Bridge around here. Many of us cross it every day on our way to school or work, whether on foot, by bike, in our car, or on a bus.

The Henderson links the back end of the upscale suburban East Side of Providence to a light industrial zone and working-class suburbs in Rumford and East Providence.

Why exactly was it built as a *freeway* with three lanes on each side (one of which in each direction has been closed for decades)? Was it really necessary to build it with freeway-style curves, sightlines, signage, and ramps? Do commuters and local delivery trucks really need to zoom over that half-mile of river at high speeds? Sure, the bridge is posted at 35mph, but it's all too common to find small and large vehicles alike flying over the bridge at 55mph+. And why not? It feels like you *should* with all those freeway visual cues.

The "freeway-ness" of the bridge, and the driving behavior it induces, have been the root of many problems that affect the bicyclist trying to cross the river, especially since the alternate crossing at the Washington Bridge was closed to bicycles for construction. Everything is complicated at the moment during maintenance construction on the Henderson: bikes can't use the travel lanes on the construction side where the road is closed down to one lane, and must use the opposite sidewalk instead. On the non-construction side, you can still ride in the roadway in the direction of traffic if you want. Regardless of construction closures, when a rider does legally use the roadway, those zooming vehicles are enough to cause anxiety and concern.

So, why did they ever build a freeway for a half mile when a calmer smaller-scale bridge seems more appropriate for its traffic use pattern?

I recently stumbled upon a brief article on the history of

the bridge at Wikipedia (see [//en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henderson_Bridge_\(Rhode_Island\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henderson_Bridge_(Rhode_Island))) and it explains everything.

From the article:

"The bridge was opened in 1969 to replace the old Red Bridge and was also part of a planned Route 44 freeway that would have extended from the Gano Street interchange with Interstate 195 (whose ramps were built specifically for the Route 44 freeway), along the west shore of the river, over the bridge, then along a never-built section of freeway in East Providence, returning to Route 44 just east of Route 114 and Route 1A. Since the freeway was never completed, the section that was built was not given a route number."

So, I guess that explains it. I wish the planners had been a little more clear in their thinking at the time, though hindsight surely is always 20/20. Hopefully the bike lanes that are planned for both sides of the bridge after the completion of the current construction will mitigate some of the dissonance and anxiety we've often found when riding on the bridge.

More on those all-important bridges

From the BikeProvidence Coalition website
www.bikeprovidence.org

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Washington Bridge update

The rumors are true, RIDOT will soon be re-opening the narrow Washington Bridge sidewalk connecting India Point Park and East Providence.

Late this month or early in January, the fences will be removed and bike commuters will no longer be forced to use the Henderson Bridge to cross the Seekonk River. This is a temporary reopening, and access will be closed again once construction of the George Redman Linear Park is imminent.

Speaking of the Linear Park: there is currently some \$15 million in place, but the project as currently designed would now cost \$33 million to construct. To get this project back on track, RIDOT will be conducting a "value engineering" study in January or February of 2009, to examine how the design might be altered in order to bring the cost down, making it more feasible given current funding realities, while not diminishing the central utility of the project as a transportation route for bikes and pedestrians. More on that will be posted here when the information is available.