**Building the Golden Gate Bridge today would be no easy task**

By Richard Halstead, The Marin Independent Journal

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IMAGINE FOR A moment that the Golden Gate Bridge has vanished like in a tale by Haruki Murakami -- nothing left but sea, sky and howling wind.

Could the bridge be reconstructed given today's superheated political environment with increased concerns about the environment, skepticism about taxes and competing regulatory jurisdictions? Would it turn out the same?

After all, it was no cakewalk back in the 1930s.

--The U.S. Department of War feared any bridge would hinder navigation.

--Marin residents worried their property taxes would be raised to pay for the structure.

--The original design for the bridge, which featured steel-girdered

sections on either end, was scrapped.

--Southern Pacific Railroad, which operated ferry service between San Francisco and Marin, used its considerable legal muscle to try to kill the project.

"I think it would probably get done; but it would cost a lot more and take a lot longer," said Steve Heminger, executive director of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission.

Heminger speaks from experience, because he is intimately acquainted with the tortuous route that construction of the Bay Bridge's new eastern span has taken. MTC oversaw selection of the design for the span. In February 1997, Caltrans unveiled a plan to build a utilitarian viaduct that it estimated could be built by 2004 for about $1 billion. After

protracted discussions about the span's design, which

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pitted former San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown against Caltrans and other community leaders, the bridge is now slated for completion by Labor Day 2013 at a cost of at least $6.3 billion.

"A number of the things that any large infrastructure project has to go through now as a matter of course didn't exist at the time the Golden Gate Bridge was built; environmental review was one of them," Heminger said.

Marin County Supervisor Steve Kinsey, who served on MTC while it oversaw the new Bay Bridge section and construction of a new bridge spanning the Carquinez Strait, said, "First there would be the upfront [politics](http://www.marinij.com/california/ci_20723639/building-golden-gate-bridge-today-would-be-no). Plan for a turf war between the Bay Conservation and Development Commission and the Coastal Commission over whose jurisdiction it would be in, probably requiring state legislation to resolve it."

Dietrich Stroeh, a Novato civil engineer who has served as a Golden Gate Bridge district board member for 15 years, said jurisdictional wrangles would present the biggest challenge.

"You have a lot of new agencies that weren't there in the 1930s. That is going to slow it down considerably," Stroeh said.

And there would be plenty of other complications,

Kinsey said.

"Disney would be lobbying Congress to let them build it within a theme park," he said. "Tribes would be offering to [finance](http://www.marinij.com/california/ci_20723639/building-golden-gate-bridge-today-would-be-no) it in return for just one casino at Fort Point. Every hip corporation would be making a pitch to do it in the shape of their logo."

And Kinsey added, "Marin would probably be divided. Critics would call it a viewshed-wrecking, growth-inducing, auto-centric, environmentally disastrous, blatantly illegal, greedy, bad idea."

Nona Dennis, vice president of the Marin Conservation League, said there is no doubt some people would oppose construction of a bridge today on the basis that it would be growth inducing.

"And that is what it was," Dennis said. "It did bring total change to Marin County."

Dennis said the conservation league was formed in anticipation of the changes the bridge would usher in. The league's founding members persuaded the county to hire a planner to begin identifying areas that should be protected from development.

"The issues would be very different today because of what we know about the biology of the bay and the land," Dennis said. "The concern back then was just to protect lands for public enjoyment. Ecology was a concept that was really not understood. Habitat was not the issue."

Heminger said the design of the new bridge would be hotly debated.

"You would have a lot of people demanding that we have to vote on it, and maybe more than one," Heminger said. He added, "In today's legal and political environment everything is so hyperscrutinized, and critics have so many opportunities to gum up the works. That all contributes to the enormous cost that we pay for these projects and the enormous delays that they suffer."

On the positive side, however, Heminger said, "We've made some advances in some of the protections that are accorded workers who build these big structures. One thing you can say is if the Golden Gate were built today fewer people would die doing it."

And another crucial issue would be how to pay for the new bridge. In today's dollars, it would cost about $1.5 billion to build the same bridge that cost $27 million in the 1930s. Stroeh said voters in Marin, San Francisco, Sonoma, Mendocino and Del Norte counties all approved the issuance of bonds to pay for the bridge that were guaranteed by their property taxes.

"Would they do it again? I don't know," Stroeh said.

Nancy McCarthy, a longtime officer of the Marin United Taxpayers Association, an organization that scrutinizes nearly every local tax proposal with skepticism, said, "I would be in favor of it, because that's not a bridge to nowhere; that's a bridge to somewhere, and a bridge to somewhere is important."

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