

Free (almost) to a good home: Chicago's Division Street bridge may be donated to Goose Island group



By Mary Wisniewski · Contact Reporter
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Can I have your bridge? That's the question a Goose Island business organization is asking the city of Chicago. And the city may agree, if the details work out for both sides.

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- Zack Cupkovic - R2 Companies

A group called Friends of Goose Island, formed by major employers and property owners on a lucrative patch of land just north of downtown, is talking to the city's Department of Transportation about the idea of taking the 114-year-old Division Street bridge, which crosses the Chicago River west of the island, and moving it north to create a pedestrian and bike pathway at Blackhawk Street.

Zack Cupkovic, a board member with Friends of Goose Island, said he has spoken with Luis Benitez, chief bridge engineer for the Chicago Department of Transportation, who said the city would work with the business group.

“He understood why we wanted to save an historic element of the area,” said Cupkovic, director of special projects for R2 Cos., which owns about 10 percent of Goose Island as well as the Morton Salt property. Goose Island is the site of multiple planned development projects.

The city plans to replace the Division Street bridge with a new bridge for vehicles in late 2019 or 2020, said CDOT spokesman Michael Claffey. Under federal law, governments need to make historic bridges available for donation to state, local or responsible private entities. Whoever takes it has to pay the cost of moving and

maintaining it. Claffey said the city will offer the Division Street bridge for donation to interested parties next year.

Friends of Goose Island had originally considered acquiring the Chicago Avenue river bridge, built in 1914. But this bridge is in “very, very bad shape,” Cupkovic said. Relocating and reassembling that bridge could have cost \$6.5 million, including \$4.5 million just to fix it up enough to move, Cupkovic said.

Friends of Goose Island does not want to spend more on an old bridge than it would cost to build a new 240-foot-long pedestrian span, which could be between \$4 million and \$5 million, Cupkovic said. Friends of Goose Island plans to fund the bridge relocation project through a public campaign sponsored and supported by local businesses and landlords. The city plans to start the process of taking down the Chicago Avenue bridge and replacing it next month. A temporary bridge will be installed before construction of a permanent replacement, which will go in after the Division Street bridge is replaced, Claffey said.

Like many other old Chicago River bridges, the Division Street bridge is a bascule design that lifts to allow tall boats to pass underneath. The replacement Division Street bridge and the proposed pedestrian bridge would be fixed, since these days just the South Branch and main stem of the river handle industrial traffic and sailboats that need movable bridges.

Curiously, the first Division Street bridge at that location, built in 1869, was removed in 1902 and reused at Blackhawk Street, according to the book “Chicago River Bridges” by Patrick McBriarty. That bridge was removed in 1910, after being declared an obstruction to navigation in an order from the U.S. secretary of war, and the location has since been without a bridge.