Editorial:

Bridge designs respect appearance of South Side

* Apr 27, 2021

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Bridges can be utilitarian, lookalike structures. Or they can push boundaries of engineering. Or they can be works of art that reflect the aesthetics of their areas.

People in Huntington’s South Side neighborhood decided they wanted the third alternative when plans were announced to replace the bridges over Fourpole Creek at 5th and 8th streets.

As reported in Sunday’s edition of The Herald-Dispatch by reporter McKenna Horsley, Huntington’s Southside Preservation and Enhancement Alliance recently announced that final designs for the two bridges differ from what was originally proposed. The new designs reflect the historic appearance of the bridges.

The Alliance started as a group of South Side residents who wanted to be more active in getting improvements and implementing community goals, said Dan Gooding, president of the Alliance. The bridges project came to the group’s attention after it learned of the West Virginia Division of Highways’ plan to update the spans.

The bridges serve as entrances to the neighborhood, so it was important to residents that the design make a good first impression. According to the group, the initial designs did not reflect the historical design of the bridges, which date to the 1920s. Alliance members contacted local and state officials to see whether changes could be made to incorporate elements that would recall the bridges’ past.

Through work among the Alliance, the DOH and the city, the current design was found. It features nods to the historic designs but with modernized improvements. For instance, the new bridges will not be supported with concrete arches but will instead have steel I-beams hidden behind concrete fasciae to bear increased weight.

The projects are expected to begin later this year or toward the beginning of 2022.

This was an important victory for neighborhood identity, but it’s more than that. Too many modern schools and government buildings look like prisons or concrete shoeboxes. The result has been architectural ugliness that kept costs down but contributes little to the visual appeal of their settings.

There have been times, such as the raze-and-rebuilds of Ironton High School and what is now the Southside Elementary- Huntington Middle school complex, that communities have asked that new structures conform to the design elements of the old. That’s what happened with the South Side bridges.

Public demand for historically accurate and visually pleasing structures — and the state’s willingness to cooperate — should provide the area with bridges that will be appreciated for generations.

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