



San Pedro bridge wears out welcome

By Donna Littlejohn Staff Writer

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The pedestrian bridge that spans Gaffey Street at the end of the 110 Harbor Freeway in San Pedro is getting a makeover. (Robert Casillas)

Drive into or out of San Pedro, and you'll learn who's having a birthday and who's graduating.

That's because San Pedro's pedestrian bridge - which arches over the end of the Harbor (110) Freeway and Gaffey Street - has become the town's catch-all bulletin board.

A bevy of handmade signs - most beginning with "HAPPY BIRTHDAY ... " or "CONGRATULATIONS ... " - flutter from the overpass, some written on paper and tacked onto the structure, others inked onto bedroom sheets and draped over the side.

It's turned the bridge into a blighted, much-maligned landmark in the eyes of many hometown residents.

Now, an upcoming makeover is aimed at ending that look.

"It's been used heavily by the community to celebrate birthdays, but the trouble is that it makes it an eyesore," said Eric Eisenberg, a San Pedro developer active in revitalization efforts.

A "monstrosity" is how Coastal San Pedro Neighborhood Council Treasurer John Stinson refers to the bridge, which also is hit with graffiti and trash.

(Officially, the bridge reads: "Welcome to San Pedro" on one side and "Come Back to San Pedro Soon" on the other, painted in large block letters.)

"Everyone and his mother drapes stuff over the side," Stinson said. "And the (official) lettering on it is almost industrial. It's hardly inviting."

The arched overpass bridge has looked so bad at times that some have lobbied to tear it down.



"There was talk

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about removing the whole bridge but that discussion ended probably a year ago," said Eisenberg, who sits on a panel that is reviewing a redesign for the 1960s-era structure.

The city's Department of Transportation said the bridge was needed to accommodate the people - some of them schoolchildren - who use it to get across Gaffey Street.

Instead, community leaders are planning an overhaul. Cleaning up the structure has long been a focus of Los Angeles City Councilwoman Janice Hahn, who has secured city funding for the work.

The \$1 million project will be completed in three phases. The first phase (\$400,000) - sandblasting and cleaning - is set to begin shortly. The 110-Gaffey Street link will be closed between 9 p.m. and 5 a.m. April 30 and May 7.

Motorists will be directed to use Channel Street or Harbor Boulevard to get on or off the freeway during those hours.

The sandblasting will remove the existing painted "Welcome to San Pedro" and "Come Back to San Pedro Soon" lettering on the bridge, added in the late 1990s.

Plans are still being worked out for the second-phase design, which will include some kind of decorative blue lighting to tie in with the nearby Vincent Thomas Bridge. A final design for that is expected in the next three to four months.

Lighting ideas have included a "wave" design or lights that are almost hidden to create a subtle effect.

"The lighting is still somewhat in flux. We have a couple different designs," Eisenberg said. "In the initial stages the plan is to try to retain the character of the bridge as opposed to doing a whole reconstruction."

The third phase, with the timeline yet to be determined, will include landscaping around the bridge and improvements to the median along the first stretch of Gaffey Street, at the town's entrance.

Also included is work to repair damaged structural poles and security lighting on the bridge, which was retrofitted in 1996.

The existing chain-link "cage" fencing on top of the bridge will be replaced by a smaller-link fence that proponents say will not only look nicer, but make it more difficult to hang signs.

On the bridge itself, "more elegant" and backlit cut-out letters will be installed that simply say "San Pedro" on each side with no other message, according to Hahn's office.

The overall effect, Eisenberg said, will be to bring the bridge back to a very simple, clean design.

Not everyone finds the vision inspiring, however.

Stinson, who also is president of the San Pedro Art Association and serves on the board of directors for Angels Gate Cultural Center, would like to see a more creative approach.

Otherwise, he said, the bridge will wind up as an "unpainted, concrete arch." Lights, he said, "won't



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"Taking it down to plain concrete shows no imagination," Stinson said. "Have (mural artist) Wyland paint a whale on it, or do a mosaic - something aquatic."

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