

# Skidders Falls Bridge Project Purpose and Need Statement

## Introduction/Background

Pennsylvania State Route (SR) 1002 over the Delaware River (Skidders Falls Bridge) is a single lane, two-span, Baltimore through truss bridge connecting Wayne County, Pennsylvania (PA) on the west side and Sullivan County, New York (NY) on the east side. The bridge was constructed in 1902 and is owned by the New York-Pennsylvania Joint Interstate Bridge Commission. The Joint Interstate Bridge Commission was established by the State of New York Senate and Assembly through the Act approved May 11, 1916, Chapter 506, Laws of 1916 and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania General Assembly by the Act approved July 25, 1917, P.L. 1180 (as amended by Act No. 169 approved December 19, 1975). The Joint Interstate Bridge Commission is responsible for the maintenance, repair, or rebuilding of the Skidders Falls Bridge and nine other bridges in the Upper Delaware region.

Major rehabilitations of the Skidders Falls Bridge were undertaken in 1971 and again in 1986. Emergency repairs were completed on the bridge in 2010, 2013, and 2016. The bridge has been closed to traffic since October 2019. The bridge, originally constructed with a nine-ton load capacity, had been posted for a four-ton capacity since 2013.

The Skidders Falls Bridge has cultural significance to the local community and larger historic preservation community. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) and is a contributing resource to the NRHP-listed Milanville, PA Historic District. It is also within the Upper Delaware Scenic and Recreational River, designated as a National Park Service (NPS) unit in 1968. The NPS considers this bridge as a contributing element to the Cultural Outstandingly Remarkable Value for the Upper Delaware Scenic and Recreational River. Coordination with consulting parties, the State Historic Preservation Offices, and NPS will occur throughout the project development process. The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) and New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) will strive to avoid impacts to the bridge. If avoidance is not possible, minimization and mitigation of cultural and environmental impacts will be implemented in accordance with the applicable environmental laws.

At this point in the project development process, PennDOT is establishing the purpose and need for this transportation improvement project in conjunction with NYSDOT and Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). The following purpose (an overarching statement of why the state departments of transportation are pursuing the project) and needs (tangible, fact-based transportation problems) were established in accordance with the guidelines of PennDOT Publication 319 Needs Study Handbook<sup>1</sup> and the Guidance on Purpose and Need<sup>2</sup>, published jointly by the FHWA and Federal Transit Administration (FTA). Supporting technical data is in the project's technical file.

An online public meeting was held on March 30, 2021, which 143 people attended and shared questions and comments. In conjunction with the presentation, a project survey was conducted between March 31, 2021 through June 1, 2021 to capture public feedback on transportation needs and data on how the public used the bridge prior to closure. Public comments were also received through e-mail, mail, and phone. The survey results and public comments were incorporated into the project needs.

## Purpose

The purpose of the project is to provide a safe and efficient crossing of the Delaware River at Skidders Falls for cars, trucks, trailers, emergency response vehicles<sup>3</sup>, bicyclists, and pedestrians.

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<sup>1</sup> PennDOT, 2020. *Publication 319, Needs Study Handbook*.

<sup>2</sup> U.S Department of Transportation, FHWA and FTA, 2003. *Guidance on Purpose and Need*.

<sup>3</sup> Emergency response vehicles are vehicles that support ambulance service, fire/rescue service, and law enforcement.

## Needs

### 1. The Skinners Falls Bridge is currently closed to traffic due to its condition, which limits efficient access for residents, businesses, and recreational users.

The Skinners Falls Bridge has deteriorated such that it is currently closed to all traffic. A 2020 bridge inspection identified that the deck and superstructure are in poor condition and the substructure is in critical condition. Specifically, the transverse timber deck immediately beneath the running boards shows severe deterioration; the stone masonry abutment on the New York side shows continued movement and separation of stones; and the steel truss members, especially in the area of the pinned connections, are in poor condition. When the Skinners Falls Bridge was originally constructed in 1902, the maximum load capacity was nine tons<sup>4</sup>. In 2007, the weight posting was reduced to seven tons. Then, in 2013, the weight posting was further reduced to four tons. In 2016, “headache bars” were installed to restrict vehicles over 8.5 feet tall as a secondary means of deterring vehicles over the posted weight limit from using the bridge.

Traffic counts conducted between 2002 and 2018 indicate approximately 388 vehicles utilized the Skinners Falls Bridge daily. This demonstrates a low but consistent usage of the bridge crossing. Current alternate routes to travel between points directly on opposite sides of the Skinners Falls Bridge generally result in use of River Road/SR 1004/SR 1017<sup>5</sup> in Pennsylvania, NY 97 in New York, and then either the Damascus-Cochection Bridge to the north or the Narrowsburg Bridge to the south. The northern route that utilizes the Damascus-Cochection Bridge is approximately 6.6 miles and results in an average increase in travel time of about 12 minutes. The southern route that utilizes the Narrowsburg Bridge is approximately 11.6 miles and results in an average increase in travel time of about 20 minutes. In a recent public survey, approximately 86% of respondents said the bridge closure has increased the time required to reach their destinations.

There are economic generators on both sides of the river. An operational bridge is needed for local commerce:

- Per the results of the public survey, 61% of respondents used the bridge daily or a few times a week when it was open.
- Approximately 69% of survey respondents said they are less apt to shop locally or visit an attraction because those destinations are harder to access due to the bridge closure.
- A local farmer noted that the Skinners Falls Bridge was the primary and safest route for transporting his livestock, up to ten cattle in a gooseneck trailer, to market. A fully loaded trailer may weigh up to ten tons. These trips, up to several times per month, are seasonal in nature. The alternative route involves sharp turns, narrow lanes, and longer distances.
- Lander’s River Trips is a New York business in the northeast quadrant of the Skinners Falls Bridge. The business entails kayak, raft, and inner tube rentals; parking; a campground; and a snack shop. The owner reported that many of the campers would cross the bridge to access businesses in Milanville, PA.
- Lothian Bed and Breakfast/Lou’s Tubes in New York operates in the southeast quadrant of the Skinners Falls Bridge. The business provides tube rentals, lodging, and an antique shop. The Lothians also own a restored, former church in Milanville, PA. This facility is rented for weddings with the bridal party returning to the B&B on the New York side for the reception. Furthermore, the Lothians would utilize the bridge to aid

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<sup>4</sup> The original maximum load capacity was determined through an in-depth inspection of the structure components, materials testing, and structural analysis modelling conducted in 2013.

<sup>5</sup> River Road is posted for ten tons. The roadway posting is in place to reduce excess damage and subsequent excess maintenance and repair caused by heavy truck loads. The River Road posting does not mean the road is unsafe for or cannot physically accommodate heavy trucks, rather it is a mechanism that requires haulers to be financially responsible for excess maintenance on the roadways they use through bonding, permits, or agreements. In addition, emergency vehicles, school buses, and others traveling to or from residences, commercial establishments or farms along the posted roadway are exempt from the state’s bonding weight limits. In contrast, bridges are weight-posted independently of roadways. Regarding the Skinners Falls Bridge, the weight postings were related to a critical safety concern for the structural integrity of the bridge. Therefore, a weight posting on River Road does not necessitate a weight limit on a connecting bridge. Thus, the Skinners Falls Bridge Project limits include logical termini and have independent utility (i.e. the project would be useable and reasonable even if no additional transportation improvements in the area are made). For more information on PennDOT’s posting and bonding policy, please visit:

<https://www.penndot.gov/ProjectAndPrograms/PostedBondedRoadway/Pages/faq.aspx>.

tubing customers on the Pennsylvania side who call for assistance. The Skinners Falls Bridge provides the most direct and efficient route for the Lothians, as owners and operators of the business, as well as their customers.

- The Milanville General Store is a business on the Pennsylvania side of the bridge. The store provides gas, groceries, camping items, gifts, baked goods, and made-to-order food items. Customers of Lander's Rivers Trips, Lou's Tubes, and the Lothian B&B frequently shop at the Milanville General Store and would use the Skinners Falls Bridge as their primary route to Milanville.
- Bill Case Polaris Sales & Service located in Beach Lake, PA noted the Skinners Falls Bridge was the most efficient and easy route when making some deliveries between their New York and Pennsylvania customers.

Available historic traffic records show that vehicles in excess of ten tons used the bridge. Every traffic count completed by PennDOT since 1998 has identified vehicles over ten tons (in excess of the original capacity of the bridge) using the Skinners Falls Bridge, with vehicles possibly in excess of 40 tons recorded crossing the bridge despite the weight posting and the headache bars, which were often vandalized to allow larger vehicles to cross. Regular usage of the bridge by overweight vehicles demonstrates a need to provide a crossing that is suitable for vehicles over ten tons.

Additionally, a Joint Position Statement was issued on March 4, 2020 by representatives from local agencies and organizations, including Damascus Township, Upper Delaware Council, Chamber of the Northern Poconos, Upper Delaware National Park Service, Town of Cochection, Lake Huntington Fire Department, Upper Delaware Scenic Byway Committee, and Wayne County Planning Commission. The Joint Position Statement asserted the Skinners Falls Bridge is needed to provide emergency response, support the local economy, and connect the adjacent Pennsylvania and New York communities.

## **2. Emergency response is negatively affected by the absence of a functional bridge in the vicinity of Skinners Falls.**

Skinners Falls is located downstream of the Skinners Falls Bridge. It is a 100-yard-long stretch of rapids that is a popular recreation attraction. Water rescue calls are common in this area. The NPS has reported that, since May 2017, there have been 151 major incidents which have been responded to from their Milanville, PA Ranger Station requiring use of the Skinners Falls Bridge as well as the adjacent Skinners Falls river access location in New York. The NPS is the primary responder for all river emergencies but is assisted by the surrounding fire departments of both states. Rescue operations depend on access to both sides of the river. During an emergency, the location of the victim and best access point can be unclear. Access to the river is generally poor from the New York side: NY 97 is far from the river, the terrain is steeper, and there are railroad tracks between NY 97 and the river. It is critical that rescue personnel and equipment from both Pennsylvania and New York, including boats and trailers, have quick and efficient access to both sides of the river near Skinners Falls.

Furthermore, the NPS has stated that access to the bridge is vital to the emergency response not only for the Skinners Falls area but for all emergencies in the region. The NPS indicated that Milanville, PA is utilized as a landing zone for "life flight" helicopters for emergencies and emergency personnel of both states, and this use is facilitated by the Skinners Falls Bridge.

There are currently limited river crossings between Pennsylvania and New York. Emergency service providers on both sides of the river depend on each other for mutual aid. Lake Huntington Volunteer Fire Department (LHVFD) and Narrowsburg Fire Department (NFD) stated they each respond to approximately 12 mutual aid calls per year that require them to cross into Pennsylvania.

The LHVFD is the closest fire company to the Skinners Falls Bridge at approximately four miles away. Although the LHVFD is located in New York, it provides service to the Milanville, PA area through a mutual aid agreement and is usually the first fire department to arrive on the scene of emergencies in the Milanville area. The LHVFD stressed the need for a bridge over the Delaware River near Skinners Falls that can handle the weight and size of fire trucks. According to the LHVFD, the inability to cross the Skinners Falls Bridge increases their response time by approximately ten minutes.

The NFD is located in Narrowsburg, NY, south of the Skinners Falls Bridge. NFD also provides mutual aid to Pennsylvania, including Milanville. The restricted bridge crossing at Skinners Falls forces NFD to utilize River Road, which has narrow lanes, tight curves, and poor sight distance, as their primary response route to Pennsylvania for full-weight fire trucks (including tanker trucks, pumper trucks, and rescue trucks towing trailered rescue boats).

The Equinunk Volunteer Fire Company (EVFC), the primary responder in Pennsylvania, has a 30-minute response time to the Milanville, PA area. EVFC stated that access to withdraw water for firefighting is not currently available on the Milanville side of the Skinners Falls Bridge. Water is primarily sourced from the New York side of the Delaware River, and multiple fill ups are often required for fire calls. Therefore, the extended EVFC response time is further compounded by the need to use and fill tanker trucks on the New York side of the river when fighting fires in the Milanville area.

NPS river response vehicles weigh approximately 4.5 tons (vehicle ~3.5 tons, boat and trailer ~one ton). Emergency response vehicles for local responders in the area range between 15 and 31 tons in weight for tankers and engines. Brushfire trucks and rescue vehicles range between six and 15 tons.

### **3. The Skinners Falls Bridge does not provide adequate accommodations for pedestrians, bicyclists, and recreational users in the area.**

The Skinners Falls Bridge is located within the Upper Delaware Scenic and Recreational River corridor. This recreation area, managed by the NPS, saw an annual average of 241,308 recreation visitors throughout its 73.4-mile length between 2015 and 2020. The Skinners Falls public river access point is on the New York side in the southeast quadrant of the bridge and offers a non-motorized boat launch and parking area. During the same period (2015-2020), this access point saw an annual average of 10,696 vehicles. From 2008 to 2012 (prior to the 2013 four-ton weight restriction), an annual average of 23,685 vehicles entered the Skinners Falls access point. In addition, a private campground is located in the northeast quadrant of the bridge (Lander's River Trips). The Skinners Falls Bridge, in its current condition, does not provide access across the river for recreational vehicles and trailers for recreational boating, fishing, camping, and shopping.

The public survey included questions to better understand bicycle and pedestrian needs in the study area. There were 278 respondents to the survey with 51 indicating they rode a bicycle and 93 indicating they walked over the bridge when it was open. When asked what type of access is needed to meet local needs, approximately 80% of survey respondents indicated bicycle or pedestrian access to the bridge is needed.

With the bridge currently closed, pedestrian and bicycle access is not provided. The detour route utilizing the nearest open bridge over the Delaware River is 6.6 miles long, which is a significant distance for a bike/ped user. Additionally, the bridge, when open to traffic, did not provide adequate bike and pedestrian accommodations. The bridge is a single-lane structure with timber decking and running boards in line with a vehicle's wheel path. The effect is such that a vehicle crossing the bridge, when it was open, was restricted to the center of the lane where the running boards are located. This configuration is problematic for bicyclists or pedestrians who were attempting to cross the bridge: a vehicle may have entered the bridge from either direction and the driver could not shift their lane position to one side in order to share the lane with the bike/ped user. Further, there are no other bike/ped accommodations on the bridge, such as a sidewalk, shared lane, or bike lane.