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KANKAKEE COMMISSION WINS FINAL APPROVAL TO REMOVE STATE LINE BRIDGE

VALPARAISO — The Kankakee River Basin and Yellow River Basin Development Commission (“the Commission”) today received the final federal permit needed to remove and preserve State Line Bridge, a decades-old obstruction to floodwater and debris on the Kankakee River at the Indiana-Illinois state line. The approximately \$2.5 million project is expected to begin this fall and be completed by December.

“I was chair of a previous Kankakee commission way back in the late 1970s, and we dreamed of removing the thing even then,” said Commission Chair John McNamara. “The bridge has been closed for almost thirty years, and it holds up high water every flood season.

“This is a momentous day. The next big day will come when two cranes walk it off the river.”

According to Executive Director Scott Pelath, removal of State Line Bridge has been a top priority since the Indiana legislature formed the Commission in 2019. Pelath said that because the antiquated structure sits so low above the river, it continually traps heavy debris that would not accumulate naturally.

“The problem isn’t just that the bridge traps debris and blocks floodwater,” said Pelath. “The bigger dilemma is that because of the bridge’s location, it is impossible to remove the obstructions in the middle of a flood—right when you most need the water to move.”

Newton County Commissioner and local farmer Rob Churchill strongly agreed.

“Farmers like me have been worrying about this bridge as long as I can remember,” said Churchill. “The snow will melt, the rain will come, and we think about our drainage running into tons of steel. The bridge’s removal will be huge for farmers.”

Pelath stated the bridge’s historic status was a major factor in seeking project approvals. Because it is subject to state and federal rules for historic structures, Pelath said the bridge will be carefully disassembled, labeled, and stored for anyone who might want to restore the structure for the public’s enjoyment.

“The bridge has some historic qualities, and we will fully respect those,” said Pelath. “This is not a salvage operation. We will take it apart piece by piece and safeguard the pieces for a community or organization that might want to reconstruct this piece of historic engineering.”

Pelath credited U.S. Army Corps of Engineers staff and State of Indiana officials with helping the Commission finalize a preservation agreement that protects the bridge’s historic value while allowing the flood-control project to proceed this year.

The engineering firm of Butler, Fairman, and Seufert in Merrillville developed the plan to remove the bridge using two cranes atop a temporary river causeway. In June, the Commission selected F.H. Paschen, also with offices in Merrillville, to remove the structure. The Commission has fully budgeted for the project.

Further information about the Commission’s mission and projects can be found at kankakeeandyellowrivers.org.

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