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Historic Swayback Bridge Survives Redwood's Troubled Waters

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BLOOMINGTON, Minn. -- For 72 years, the Ramsey Park Swayback Bridge in Redwood Falls, Minnesota has withstood the test of time, and that of Mother Nature, with its concrete and granite stone solidly in place in the aftermath of severe weather and flooding last spring. Built in 1938 under President Roosevelt's New Deal Works Progress Administration (WPA), the bridge stood solid as above normal temperatures caused rapid melt of the winter snowpack, flooding Redwood County and sending large slabs of ice and tree debris rushing down the Redwood River toward the bridge. Although several stones on the bridge surface were dislodged, the structure survived the flooding with what appears to be minimal damage. It wasn't the first time the bridge faced trouble.

"The bridge was built out of necessity," said Gary Revier, Mayor of Redwood Falls. "Other bridges washed away every year." The 183-foot ten-span structure is constructed of concrete and North Redwood granite, quarried by hand from the William Hosken quarry, north of North Redwood Falls. Appearing in a video production produced by FEMA, Mayor Revier provided a tour of the bridge and an explanation of its place in the community.

"There is no way to put into economic gain or beauty that this bridge brings to our community, Revier said. Standing on the Ramsey Park Swayback Bridge, Revier described the meaning of the bridge to residents nearby and others who visit the area around the bridge known as Alexander Ramsey Park. "This is the largest municipal park in Minnesota. These structures are such a part of the history and the ambiance that we enjoy in Ramsey City Park today."

The damage to the bridge, and efforts to repair it, have caught the attention of the Minnesota Historical Society. In a letter to FEMA, the group acknowledges federal assistance to help pay for damage to the bridge, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The bridge is also listed in the National Bridge Inventory.

"We need to work through the (Minnesota) Historical Society to make repairs that won't change the physical features of the bridge or the attributes of the bridge," said William Rabenberg, Redwood County Highway Engineer. Rabenberg said it could be several months before restoration work begins. "We anticipate restoring this bridge sometime in the later part of the fall of 2010 or sometime in 2011."

During the past several weeks, FEMA has reviewed inspection data and damage assessments on the bridge as part of Redwood County's application for federal disaster assistance. The review is guided by the Environmental Planning and Historic Preservation (EHP) program, which integrates the protection and enhancement of environmental, historic, and cultural resources into FEMA's mission, programs and activities.

"The teamwork between Redwood County, the State Historic Preservation Office, and FEMA is reflected in the confidence we share in our efforts to guide this project in accordance with all federal, state and local guidelines," said Joseph P. Hudick, FEMA environmental compliance officer. "We look forward to advancing this project together."

The Ramsey Park Swayback Bridge was one of scores of structures constructed by WPA crews in state parks during the late 1930s and early 1940s. It is the only known bridge to be constructed using the swayback design of a reversed arch with its lowest section in the middle of the span. Typically, bridges are built with a traditional arch in which the high point is at the center of the span.

The video, produced locally with the assistance of the Minnesota Historical Society and the FEMA Environmental Planning and Historic Preservation team, can be viewed on the FEMA Multimedia Library: www.fema.gov/medialibrary/media_records/2866. It can also be accessed on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqD557QiLec.

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