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Matt Green, California State Parks Superintendent of Sierra District, talks with Doug Moon, right, during a tour of the Bridgeport Covered Bridge in Penn Valley on Monday, June 23, 2014. The Department of Parks and Recreation will begin restoration on the Bridgeport Covered Bridge after it was granted \$1.3 million by the state.

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State budget includes money to restore



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Nevada County's Bridgeport Covered Bridge – the longest surviving single-span covered bridge in the country – will be restored to survive at least another century.

A three-year fight for funding, launched by members of a grass-roots campaign committee known as Save Our Bridge, ended June 20 when Gov. Jerry Brown approved \$1.3 million for the bridge's restoration in the state's final budget. The funding effort included the submission of more than 500 letters and emails to the governor the week before the budget was signed.

"The budget reflects the governor's concern that, whether it's the parks or highway system, we need to take care of what we have because there's clearly a backlog in maintenance," said H.D. Palmer, spokesman for the governor.

The 208-foot wooden bridge stretching over the South Yuba River is warped. Years of wear and tear have caused a dangerous deformation: Joints have come undone, and tension rods have exceeded their capacity to hold the bridge together.

In 2011, the state's Department of Parks and Recreation was forced to close the 152-year-old bridge to pedestrians after an engineering survey confirmed that the bridge was structurally unsafe. Vehicles were banned on the bridge in 1972.

A survey projected \$1.3 million in repairs, but the bridge sat untouched.

"In three years the only thing we've done to the bridge physically is a chain-link fence," said Dave Anderson, president of the South Yuba River Park Association, which supports awareness and restoration efforts in the South Yuba State Park that includes the bridge. "It drives me crazy."



The bridge is a national historical landmark, known as the longest surviving single-span bridge in the nation, according to the National Society for the Preservation of Covered Bridges. It drives the economy of the largely rural Nevada County, said county Supervisor Hank Weston, by drawing as many as 700 tourists a year.

“It’s our lighthouse in Nevada County,” he said “So many people know about it and visit it. It’s their icon.”

The Save Our Bridge coalition, with strong ties to nonprofit organizations such as SYRPA and the South Yuba River Citizens League, as well as city councils in Grass Valley, Nevada City and Truckee, was founded in 2012. Members worried financial support would not come soon enough to save the bridge.

With funding in place, the coalition – fearing a fall and winter of strong winds and rising river waters will further deteriorate or collapse the bridge – said work needs to begin immediately.

“We will do everything in our power to communicate the community’s desire and wishes for quick action on this project to any and all of our elected representatives in Sacramento and to the Department of Parks and Recreation,” said Doug Moon, the coalition chairman. “We’re going to push.”

The department’s plan calls for the repairs to be completed in two phases.

During the stabilization phase, slated to begin Sept. 2, two steel girders will be installed on both sides of the bridge with cables anchoring it to the shore. Bridge advocates expect this phase to take six to eight weeks, but state officials are giving the contractor up to the end of year to complete it.

Engineers said stabilization will preserve the bridge’s framework and prevent further deformation.

The restoration phase is to take much longer. The restoration's draft design is to start this summer, but construction might not begin until 2018, said the Department of Parks and Recreation, allowing time to acquire the required permits and find a contractor with experience in bridge restoration. In order to retain the bridge's status as a historical landmark, each piece that is not salvageable must be replaced with an exact replica, according to the Office of Historic Preservation standards.

Bridge advocates will push to accelerate the start of the restoration to preserve as much of the original bridge as possible before El Niño weather conditions materialize, if they do. They hope for a June 2015 date, while the Department of Parks and Recreation has no reopening estimate.

"We never slowed down," said Weston, of the three-year funding effort. "Now, the final stage is just get it done."

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