The Harvard Bridge. (From The Tech photo file)

Looking Back

Harvard Bridge to be rebuilt by 1980

Editor’s Note: The Harvard Bridge is a familiar sight to MIT students, but the old structure needs a face-lift, as reported in the April 4, 1975 issue of The Tech.

By Farrel Poteat

The Harvard Bridge will be rebuilt by 1980, according to a Metropolitan District Commision (MDC) engineer. The bridge, which connects MIT and Boston, extending Mass.

The engineer, Harold Sidineius, told The Tech that the MDC is intensively studying ways to reconstruct the bridge, but cannot develop final plans until the necessary funds are obtained. "The probability of a new bridge within the next five years is one hundred percent," he said.

Bill Chisholm, MDC Superintendent of Information, confirmed that the bridge will be rebuilt, but could not say when construction will begin, pointing out the uncertainty of obtaining funds.

Chisholm said that the MDC submitted an application for federal funds to the Department of Public Works (DPW) two years ago and is still waiting for a decision. He explained that the MDC "evidently has a low priority with the DPW." His colleague Sidineius suggested that requests for funds "have to go through a computerized study that takes forever."

Preliminary renewal plans, Sidineius said, call for the replace-
ment of the superstructure of the bridge, leaving only the piers, the column beneath the bridge that hold it above the Charles River.

The bridge was built using ductile steel in 1890. Sidineius explained, adding that ductile steel becomes extremely brittle with age. As a result, he noted, the parts of the bridge that are not supported underneath by piers may collapse into the river.

But the danger of such a collapse is remote, according to Sidineius. "With vigilance and maintenance it shouldn’t collapse, but that’s very dependent on how many illegally loaded (excessively weighted) trucks cross the bridge."

We do a lot of emergency repairs on the bridge," he went on, "and will continue to do so until the bridge is repaired. But you can only do a certain amount of emergency repair before that becomes ineffective.

Because the largest geological fault in the Boston area runs beneath the bridge, and also because the original plans for the bridge are not available, many questions remain about the structure of the bridge, making more difficult the task of devising plans for its reconstruction. One question noted by Sidineius concerns the condition and length of the piles, which are the long structures driven into the ground to support the piers. "The piles should be good," he observed, "but you never know what affect that water has on them."

Construction, when it begins, will be done on one side of the bridge at a time, allowing traffic to continue in the lane on the side not being worked on, according to Sidineius and Chisholm.

Chisholm also acknowledged that "rough ridges" exist along the traffic lanes of the bridge, making for very bumpy riding. "We are aware of the problem and plan to take care of it," he said.

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