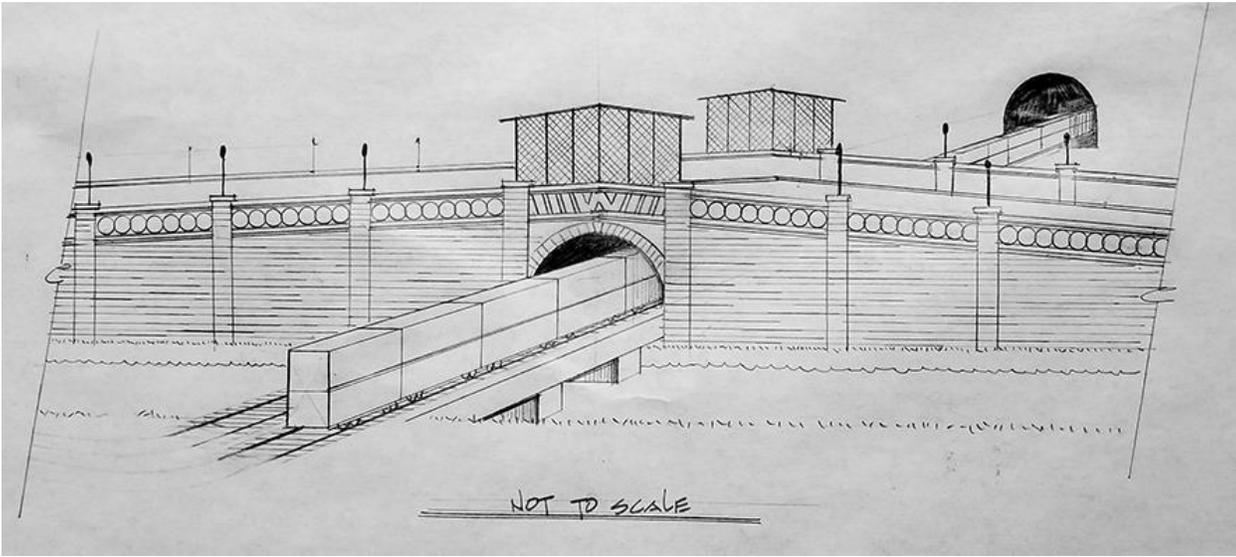


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City of Welch Seeking Permanent Solution to Underpass Flooding, Blockages



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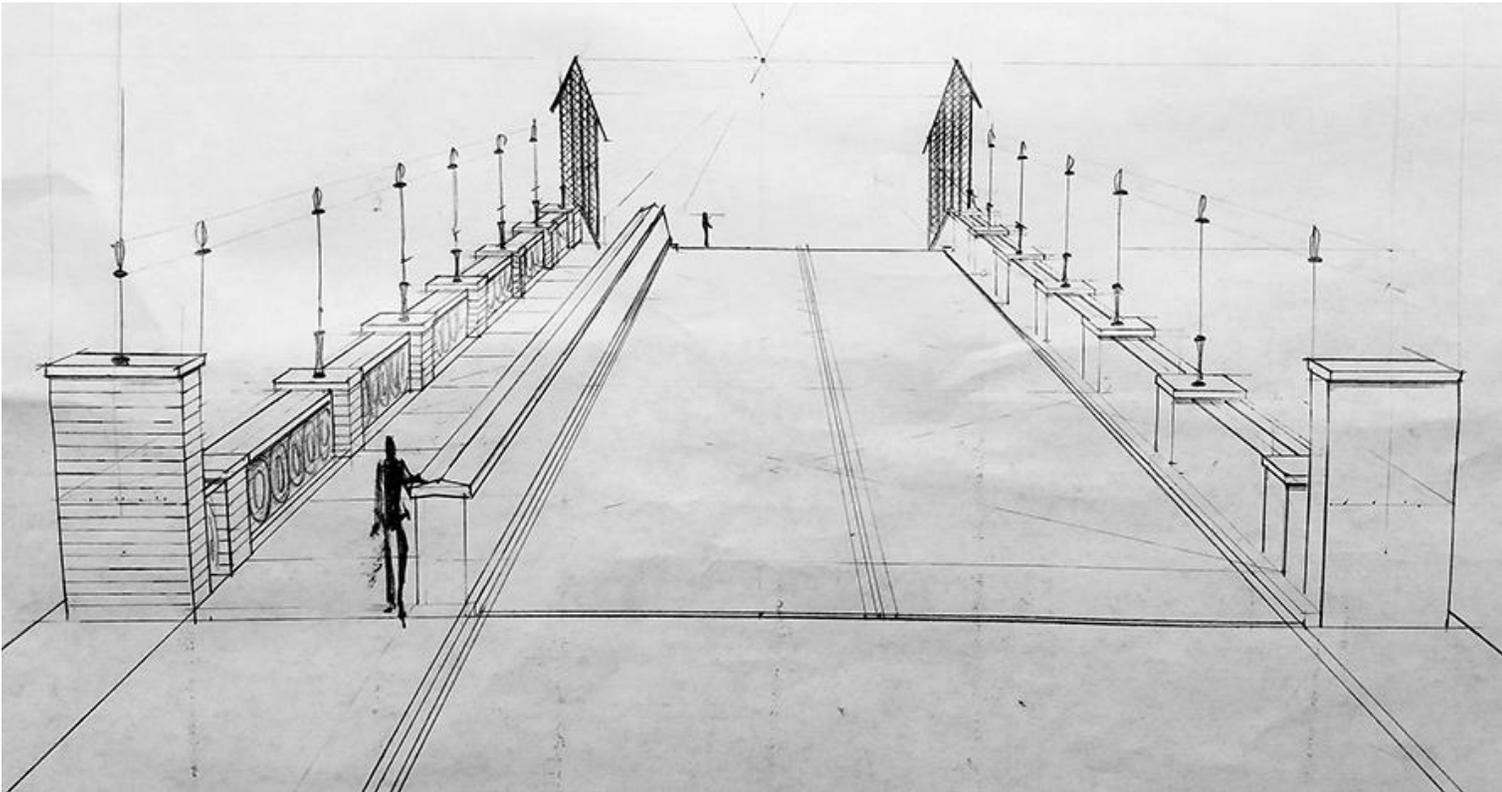
WELCH, W. Va. – When heavy rains struck the area in February, both underpasses in Welch were blocked by flood water, effectively shutting Welch off from half of McDowell County. In that moment, a critical need for the City of Welch became glaringly obvious to Mayor Harold McBride.

With more water than the pumping system in the flood wall could keep up with, Rt. 16 was left completely impassable at the underpass just under a half mile from Welch Community Hospital.



“When you have to take nurses down the railroad tracks to try to get them to the hospital, it’s a miracle that someone hasn’t died on the way to the hospital from being held up at the underpass,” said McBride. “But it will happen at some point.”

The scenario of someone losing their life just half a mile away from the hospital drove the Mayor to look for a permanent solution, which to McBride would be to build a bridge over the railroad crossing, ensuring traffic flow even during times of flooding. Local artist Tom Acosta sat down with City Officials to sketch an initial concept for the bridge, with Mayor McBride saying the artist helped tie everyone’s ideas together.



Since the COVID-19 pandemic has gripped the world, the need for clear access to medical facilities has never been more critically needed all over the world. When flooding isn't an issue, the underpass is also subject to traffic accidents.

"We've lost school buses, truck trailers, RVs," said McBride about the frequent traffic delays caused by large vehicles failing to use the proper lane. "But anyone can do it, all it takes is a second."

The other underpass at Coney Island is a key connector between State Routes 16, 52 and 123. By putting in a bridge along McDowell Street, Mayor McBride said he would suggest moving the pumping system to the Coney Island underpass to help keep water under control and traffic flowing.

"We've got a lot of people onboard for the project, including Senator Rollan Roberts," said McBride. "He came down and walked through all of this with us." After Senator Roberts' visit to Welch, he released a newsletter urging support for the project.

"Welch has long served the southern part of the state with dignity, but for many years, Welch has been plagued with a couple of main highway arteries in and out of the city that desperately need corrected because of flooding issues," said Roberts. "Loss of lives is imminent."

Senator Roberts wrote about the West Virginia Department of Highways spending \$900,000 to remedy the flooding situation at the Coney Island underpass, but the problem wasn't fully resolved.

"Recently, ambulance personnel had to wait six hours for the water to recede enough to get their patient across town to Welch Community Hospital," said Roberts. "The person they were transporting had already expired. When flooded, the intersection blocks traffic for hours so that first responders and others cannot get to their homes or places of work."

'If it fits the federal criteria, to solve this city's two major problems with CARES ACT funding would be an acceptable and proper expenditure, because both flooding problems block access to and from the hospital, as well as the federal prison," said Senator Roberts. "The flooding crisis has been exacerbated by the city receiving more rainfall in recent years. These two infrastructure failures are now causing life and death scenarios, should be made priorities, and not ignored any longer."

Years ago, traffic would simply pass over the railroad lines during times of flooding, but Norfolk Southern has changed their stance on this, prohibiting the lines from being crossed. But the proposed bridge plan would go over the railway along McDowell Street in Welch.

"Back in the day, the railroad would let us cross the tracks but it's different now, it's a different scenario," said McBride. "That's the reason we've got to get something done about it."

McBride said the price of the project would not be as high as most would expect as well.

"The tunnel is the only actual structure to build, across the railway itself," said McBride. "For the rest of it, we can build two walls and just fill in the space between them."

McBride said the next step in the project's future would be a meeting with the head of the West Virginia Department of Highways.

"We'll lose a life at that underpass someday," said McBride. "I just thought it's time we do something about this."