

Trust honor validates Save Our Bridge advocacy

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For more than 30 years, many St. Augustine residents advocated on behalf of the preservation of the Bridge of Lions to prevent the state from tearing it down and building a new bridge. Organizing themselves first in the mid-1970s into Friends of St. Augustine Architecture and then reforming that group with even more supporters into Save Our Bridge Inc., they succeeded. The end result is the rehabilitated Bridge of Lions that graces our skyline today.

Last month, Save Our Bridge Inc., was recognized as a National Trust for Historic Preservation Honor Award recipient. They were chosen for one of 23 awards given annually by the National Trust because of the group's tenacity to save the bridge.

The fight was rough because the 1927 bridge, hailed on its opening as the Most Beautiful Bridge in Dixie, had deteriorated in its appearance and its mechanics although the DOT continually maintained the bridge. The aging drawspan angered residents trying to use the bridge for transportation to and from the mainland to Anastasia Island. Its drawspan was unreliable. Modern ship and barge traffic squeaked by through its narrow opening creating safety issues.

But Save Our Bridge succeeded convincing the state DOT, federal officials and local officials that rehabilitation with modernization of its mechanics and improved safety measures would render the bridge viable.

In a recent news release recognizing the accomplishments of the group, National Trust president Stephanie Meeks said, "The Save Our Bridge group refused to stand by and watch another piece of its city's heritage be carted off to a landfill, and for that, they have our thanks and admiration."

Indeed, they do from us, too.

Save Our Bridge faced much local opposition. A group called Citizens for a New Safe Bridge was a leading opponent. But the preservationists did not back down. In 1999, the Bridge of Lions was placed on the National Trust's annual list of the 11 Most Endangered Places in the United States. Later that same year, Gov. Jeb Bush came to St. Augustine to announce the rehab option would be followed.

The new bridge opened last March and within days, a series of drawspan problems began that did not endear it to many in the community. But by May, the problems were resolved and to date,

the bridge seems to be in working order.

Mary Ruffin Hanbury, a former program director for the trust's southern regional office in Charleston, is well-versed in St. Augustine's heritage tourism, its community preservation efforts, and the Save Our Bridge group. Hanbury also co-wrote, edited and produced A Heritage Tourism Assessment and Plan for St. Augustine in 2003. Now a private consultant on historic preservation, she said that most awards are given for saving neglected historic buildings but this one is different. "This award was not for the design of the bridge but for the advocacy and the involvement of the citizens," she said.

In lauding the award, Hanbury described the group as inspiring, tenacious and determined.

We concur.

Save Our Bridge is deserving of the National Trust Honor Award because of its stewardship on behalf of a community icon, the Bridge of Lions. They made the commitment to be stewards of a significant part of our landscape. It says to the world that this community supports saving its past for the quality of life for our residents and visitors.

Through ups and downs, Save Our Bridge members endured. The National Honor Award is the crowning jewel that validates the advocacy by Save Our Bridge members.

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