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## Public safety should outweigh private development in Hoback

By Robert Frodeman

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The red bridge at Astoria is a lovely relic. It not only adds a splash of color to the landscape, it's also a piece of local history. Along with swinging bridge in South Park, it once spanned the Snake River on Highway 22. (Both bridges were moved in 1961.)

Unfortunately, the bridge at Astoria is out of commission again, for the second time in 18 months. The damage has led to a public safety hazard that must be addressed.

In June of 2021 a too-tall semi-trailer heading to the Snake River Sporting Club tried to cross at Astoria and damaged the trusses of the bridge. With red bridge unusable for heavy vehicles, dump trucks and heavy loads turned to the only other driving access to the Sporting Club properties — Hoback Junction South Road and the unpaved Forest Service road known as Johnny Counts.

My wife and I live on Hoback Junction South. We became daily witnesses to the new situation: huge trucks navigating a sharp, steep turn just past the bridge over the Hoback, then traveling along a rural road lined with houses. This is a road that lacks real shoulders, where schoolchildren walk, joggers pass by, and mothers push their strollers. The road was overwhelmed.

The Snake River Sporting Club — owners of the red bridge — assured Hoback residents that the heavy traffic going to the club on Hoback Junction South and Johnny Counts would be temporary. In July of 2021 they said that the Astoria bridge would be fixed by September. In September we were told October; in October they said the bridge would be fixed in November. Finally in December the Forest Service stepped in and locked the gate to Johnny Counts. Thankfully, no one had been hurt, although the road itself suffered damage from the heavy trucks.

Two weeks ago the red bridge was hit again by another semi going to the Sporting Club. The bridge is once again impassable, and traffic has increased on Hoback Junction South and Johnny Counts.

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Johnny Counts — the latter being a rutted, one-lane, snow-covered road that runs above the bluffs of the Snake River. There is no estimate of how long the bridge will be out of commission this time.

Hoback residents are again subject to dozens of additional vehicles on a rural road.

We understand the need for access by residents and emergency vehicles to assure the safety of Sporting Club residents. But there are also a number of homes under construction at the Sporting Club, which means an additional 100 trucks driven by construction workers each day. What happens when these workers run out of construction materials? Are we again going to be subjected to concrete mixers and tractor-trailers? Moreover, Astoria Hot Springs is currently closed. Are we going to allow that additional traffic as well?

We need to draw a line. This is a rural road, not a commuter highway.

In a letter dated Dec. 14, sent to local government agencies, the Sporting Club asks for “a less restrictive temporary access plan on the emergency access forest road that does not result [in] the loss of jobs for dozens of local employees and severe economic hardship for the operating businesses, residents and guests in the SRSCISD District.”

The Sporting Club fails to acknowledge that the difficulties they face are of their own making. Set aside the fact that the red bridge should have been replaced long ago (its twin, Swinging Bridge near Munger Elementary, is scheduled for removal next year). The Sporting Club could have easily prevented further damage by installing a simple metal clearance bar at the bridge entrance to identify trucks that were too large.

It's unfortunate that construction at the Sporting Club is being interrupted. But the fact that the bridge is damaged again is a result of the owner's failure to act a year and a half ago. Commercial concerns must give way to matters of public safety. The addition of 100 trucks of construction workers is already too much, and unless we are prepared to allow massive trucks down these roads, construction will have to stop soon anyway. The completion of luxury homes is not worth a fatality on Hoback Junction South or Johnny Counts roads.

This is the decision facing local government. Teton County controls access on Hoback Junction South Road, and the Forest Service is in charge of Johnny Counts Road. The current Forest Service permit allows vehicles up to 35,000 pounds. This is too much. Limiting access to

passenger cars and emergency vehicles will spur the repair of the red bridge at Astoria — and encourage the development of a long-term solution to the limitations of a quaint but outmoded bridge.

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