

## Court ruling spells doom for old span

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Supporters of the historic U.S. 79 bridge over the White River in Clarendon had their Hail Mary attempt to save the bridge slapped down by a federal judge Monday.

And though the effort bought them some time, they say the game is pretty much over.

On Monday, U.S. District Judge James M. Moody Jr. denied a request by the city of Clarendon and the nonprofit Friends of the Historic White River Bridge at Clarendon for a temporary restraining order seeking to block the Arkansas Highway and Transportation Department from moving forward with a project to demolish and remove the 85-year-old steel double-span Warren truss bridge and its approaches.

Bids on the project were scheduled to be opened Wednesday, and even though the judge declined to stop the bid process, the department decided to withdraw the project from Wednesday's letting because of the uncertainty the litigation created.

"Upon resolution of the uncertainty, we will bid the project," Danny Straessle, the department spokesman, said Monday.

After hearing of the department's decision, Clarendon Mayor James Stinson III didn't sound optimistic. To pursue the matter further in court, the judge required the city and nonprofit to put up \$120,000 a month for a bond, a sum the mayor said they cannot afford.

"It looks like we're licked," he said. "It's a shame."

The looming end to the bridge has come despite what began more than two years ago as little more than a quest by two brothers, Johnny Moore IV and Jeremiah Moore, from the Monroe County seat.

They, Stinson and others eventually formed the nonprofit to help transform the picturesque bridge and approaches into what they billed as the longest pedestrian and bicycle bridge in the world.

The bridge has proved popular with cyclists already, though they now need a police escort to cross it because it is so narrow to cross with vehicle traffic. A new \$34.1 million span is scheduled to open this summer.

"Seven groups needed a police escort this weekend," Stinson said.

Key to the plan is saving the western approaches to the bridge, which goes over a part of the Cache River National Wildlife refuge. The refuge was established in 1986 to protect significant wetland habitats that provide feeding and resting areas for migrating waterfowl.

The wildlife refuge covers about 56,000 acres in Jackson, Woodruff, Monroe, and Prairie counties and is one of the few remaining areas in the Lower Mississippi River Valley unaltered by significant channelization and drainage, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which manages the refuge.

But the Highway Department said that while the 702-foot steel bridge span over the White could stay, the approaches over the refuge had to go. It cites a "compatibility determination" signed in 2007 requiring the approaches to be demolished, the demolished material removed and the right of way restored to the "natural topography," including the re-establishment of native hardwoods.

The effort to save the bridge eventually grew to include the Department of Arkansas Heritage and Gov. Asa Hutchinson, who met with top U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials on a visit to Washington.

"We worked with the staff of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and hoped that they would see the benefits of the bridge as a hiking and biking trail and a heritage tourism destination," Stacy Hurst, the Arkansas Heritage Department director, said in a statement. "It appears that effort has failed, but I believe the State of Arkansas and Gov. Hutchinson did everything that could be done on behalf of saving the bridge."

Robert S. Moore Jr. of Arkansas City was torn, given that he is a member of the Arkansas Highway Commission while at the same time an east Arkansas resident "with a deep interest in the history of the Delta."

"It certainly seemed like a very worthy project," he said. "But all avenues to save the bridge has been exhausted, apparently."

**Caption: Arkansas Democrat-Gazette**

**Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/STATON BREIDENTHAL**

**An effort to save the U.S. 79 bridge over the White River in Clarendon from demolition was dealt a blow Monday when a federal judge declined a request to stop the Arkansas Highway and Transportation Department from opening bids on the project.**