



BLATNIK BRIDGE REPLACEMENT PROJECT

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



What is the history of the Blatnik Bridge?

The High Bridge was constructed from 1958-61, opening to traffic in 1961. It replaced a swinging toll bridge around the same location that carried vehicle and rail traffic. It was renamed the John A. Blatnik Bridge in 1971. It was widened and strengthened in 1993-94 and repaired in 2013-14 and again in 2016. It was built to support loads totaling 154,000 pounds, but over the years, that weight restriction has been reduced to 80,000 pounds.



Why are you replacing the bridge?

The Blatnik Bridge is critical to the Port of Duluth-Superior. Built in 1961, it is in poor condition, has weight restrictions and traffic safety issues and is nearing the end of its service life. Without replacement, the Blatnik Bridge is predicted to close by 2030. Constructing a new bridge will address aging infrastructure, improve safety and better accommodate oversize/overweight freight.

Slated to begin construction in fall 2026, the new bridge was planned to follow the Twin Ports Interchange project in Duluth to avoid having multiple major traffic impacts at the same time. While the two states share in costs, process and decision making, MnDOT leads projects relating to the Blatnik Bridge project, and WisDOT leads projects relating to the Bong Bridge.

What is the cost, and how are MnDOT and WisDOT paying for it?

The total cost estimate for replacing the bridge is \$1.8 billion, including inflation. In early 2024, MnDOT and WisDOT received \$1.058 billion in grant funding through the federal bipartisan infrastructure law. The two agencies will split the remaining costs, and each has earmarked \$400 million for the project.

What is the timeline for new construction?

The project is in preliminary design from now until 2026; final design will occur from 2026-27; construction is expected to begin in fall 2026; and full closure of the bridge is anticipated in 2027. The full structure is expected to be closed for four to five years. This timeline could change once a contractor is hired in 2026.

What is the projected service life of the new bridge?

Once completed, the new bridge's expected service life is 100 years.

Why do we need two bridges?

Two bridges between Duluth and Superior are important for reducing traffic backups, accommodating freight movements and aiding in emergency response. Having two bridges also minimizes disruptions to traffic in the event one bridge is closed due to an emergency or needed maintenance. (See included fact sheet.)

What about a tunnel?

Tunnels were considered during the evaluation process. They did not move forward for further evaluation due to depth for the shipping channel, and the entrance and exit grades would be too steep. Tunnels of this length would also exclude oversize loads and vehicles carrying hazardous materials. Due to air quality concerns, a single tunnel would not allow for bicycles and pedestrians.

Why is it being built on the same alignment?

MnDOT and WisDOT evaluated more than 25 alternatives and narrowed the list to five for deeper review. Ultimately, replacing the bridge on its existing alignment was selected. This option will cost less, take less time to construct, minimize environmental impacts and help reduce construction delays/hazards for the traveling public. (See included fact sheet.)

Will there be a multi-use trail?

Yes. The plan for the new bridge includes a 12-foot-wide multi-use path along the bridge, which will connect to trails on both sides of the river.

Why are you changing the Wisconsin approach?

Traffic volumes have grown significantly since the existing bridge and interchange were constructed more than 60 years ago, which has led to increased crashes, congestion, poor operations and redirection of traffic.

The new interchange will eliminate the need for the traffic signal on US 53 at the approach to the bridge and reduce the

amount of traffic currently using local streets to avoid the congestion that the existing structure has created. Changes to the Wisconsin side also will encourage slower speeds for traffic entering the city and provide a direct connection from US 53 to the bridge.

What are/were public input opportunities?

MnDOT and WisDOT have hosted multiple public meetings since project planning began in 2020. The public was also invited to contribute feedback throughout the Environmental Assessment process, which included studying bridge alignment alternatives. In addition, the team has held multiple meetings to engage business owners and pop-up sessions in Superior at various locations.



Will any businesses or homes be displaced because of construction?

Replacement of the Blatnik Bridge requires relocating five business properties in Wisconsin and three business properties in Minnesota. Additionally, there will be numerous parcels in Wisconsin and Minnesota that will be either acquired in whole or in part, but these acquisitions will not require any additional relocations.

Real estate teams from both states have been working with the relocatees since 2023 and are working to have titles to the properties and relocations completed by year-end. Relocatees have been offered and will be receiving relocation benefits.

Are any roadway improvements planned before the bridge is closed to traffic?

Knowing adjustments to traffic are going to need to be made to keep traffic flowing during construction, MnDOT and WisDOT studied multiple routes in Duluth and Superior and have identified proposed changes, including resurfacing segments of roadway, including Winter Street and Susquehanna Avenue in Superior; installing temporary traffic signals; and adjusting turn lanes. These could be improved once the design-build contractor is selected. (See included fact sheet.)

Will any dredging be occurring as part of the project?

Dredging of the St. Louis River isn't anticipated for the removal and replacement of the Blatnik Bridge. However, if dredging is required, Minnesota and Wisconsin will coordinate with all necessary agencies.

Will construction impact boat and ship traffic?

The Port of Duluth-Superior is the largest on the Great Lakes, and industries in both states rely heavily on boat and ship access. Construction will be staged to allow for boat and ship traffic to continue during bridge replacement.

Why does the bridge have to be closed? How long will it be closed?

Closing the bridge eliminates the risk of working next to live traffic and allows for a shorter construction timeline because the contractor can work on any segment of the bridge at any time.

Bridge closure is estimated at four to five years. The bridge was closed to traffic in the mid-1990s, so it could be widened.

The design-build delivery method has been selected. What does that mean?

The design-build process was chosen for the Blatnik Bridge project, which means MnDOT and WisDOT define the standards and general specifications expected for the project, start the design process and then hire a contractor to complete the design and construct the bridge to satisfy those requirements. This process was chosen for the Blatnik project for efficient coordination between the design team and the construction team, a lower cost and more innovative design and construction.



How many workers are anticipated on the project?

Construction is expected to start in fall 2026, and it'll take an estimated 1.5 million to 1.75 million labor hours to complete the project. Estimates place a maximum number of workers in the Superior-Duluth area at 150 during peak time.

Where will traffic be routed if a crash or weather close the Bong Bridge?

Project officials are coordinating with emergency responders in Minnesota and Wisconsin now to develop a plan in the event of a closure of the Bong Bridge. The two closest alternative crossings are southwest of the Bong Bridge – the Oliver Bridge, which carries MN 39 and WIS 105 over the St. Louis River, and a bridge that carries MN 48 and WIS 77 over the St. Croix River between Hinckley, MN, and Danbury, WI.



Tied-arch bridge



Cable-stay bridge

What will the new bridge look like?

This currently is unknown. The new bridge will be either a tied-arch bridge, similar to the Bong Bridge, or a cable-stay structure, similar to the e Martin Olav Sabo Bridge in Minneapolis. A visual quality committee has been formed to give guidance on colors, textures, railing, lighting, landscaping, pier caps, interpretive signage and other features of the bridge. More details will be known when a contractor has been hired through the design-build process.

Will the new bridge still be called the Blatnik Bridge?

Because a new bridge is being constructed, the name could be changed, but this would require an act of Congress.

When the bridge first opened to traffic in December 1961, it was known as the High Bridge. The bridge was renamed on Sept. 24, 1971, in honor of U.S. Rep. John A. Blatnik, who championed the project. Blatnik died a little more than 30 years after the structure was opened.

Blatnik was born in Chisholm, MN, and worked as a chemistry teacher there after college. From 1940-44, he served in the Minnesota State Senate, and in 1946, he was elected to Congress representing Minnesota's 8th District in the northeastern part of the state. Re-elected 13 times, he helped develop the legislation to build the St. Lawrence Seaway and served as chairman of the Public Works Committee, now the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, during his last two terms.



KEY FACTS

The 1961 bridge is in **poor condition**, has traffic and safety issues and is nearing the end of its life.

The 8,000-foot (1.5 miles) long bridge is critical to the Port of Duluth-Superior, the **largest port on the Great Lakes**, and serves the regional economy of both states.

Total project cost is estimated at **\$1.8 billion**, which is shared by MnDOT and WisDOT.

The bridge is currently ranked as the **number one risk for service interruption** in MnDOT's statewide bridge inventory.

In its current state, Blatnik Bridge is **predicted to close by 2030 if construction of this project does not move forward**.

Bridge construction is planned for 2026, with soil investigations and other preparation work happening **this summer**.

Blatnik Bridge and the **S 2/ Bong Bridge** are both needed to meet the needs of the region.

MnDOT and WisDOT are actively engaged with stakeholders and the public on this project.

Blatnik Bridge is a **critical international connection** and a vital link in our supply chain economy.



OVERVIEW

The John A. Blatnik Bridge serves an average of 33,000 vehicles each day between Duluth, Minn., and Superior, Wis., and is nearing the end of its useful life. MnDOT and WisDOT engaged the public and worked through a process to determine replacement of the bridge. MnDOT is the lead agency on this project, though it is a joint venture between the two states. The new bridge will address aging infrastructure, improve safety and better accommodate oversize/overweight freight.

PURPOSE STATEMENT

Provide an interstate highway connection across the St. Louis Bay that does not restrict the movement of freight and provides local, regional and international movement in a reliable and efficient manner.

NEED STATEMENT

Primary needs

- Bridge condition: Truss and approach span deterioration
- Vehicle safety: Above-average crash rates, tight ramps on the Wisconsin side, level of service, geometric influences and weather influences
- Vehicle mobility: Traffic operations, load restrictions in place, cannot accommodate oversize, overweight loads and freight

Secondary needs

- Walkability/bikeability

Additional considerations

- Maritime freight navigation
- Consistency with regional plans
- Social, economic and environmental considerations

More information: mndot.gov/d1/projects/blatnik-bridge

Blatnik Bridge Project

ALTERNATIVES AND TIMELINE



BRIDGE HISTORY

- 1958-1961: The High Bridge (later known as the Blatnik Bridge) is constructed
- 1961: Blatnik Bridge opens to traffic; designed for a max vehicle weight of 154,000 pounds
- 1973: Median change from curb to median barrier
- 1994: Widening project
- 1995: Painting and repair project
- 2008: Emergency gusset repair and spot repairs. First load restriction to 80,000 pounds
- 2010: Suspender rope placement project
- 2012-2013: Repaint truss in splash zone, perform truss strengthening and install new lighting system. Changed max vehicle weight back to 154,000 pounds
- 2016: Repair project (emergency gussets and cable). Load rating reduced again to 104,000 pounds
- 2019: Inspection: Load rating further reduced to 80,000 pounds (legal loads only)
- 2021-22: Planned maintenance work



1960: The steel framework of the High Bridge rises above the St. Louis Bay.

FINANCING

MnDOT and WisDOT have identified up to \$400 million each to fund matching portions of the Blatnik reconstruction and match federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) funds. The two states were awarded a \$1.06 billion grant through the Multimodal Project Discretionary Grant under the MEGA and INFRA program categories.

DESIGN & CONSTRUCTION TIMELINE

- 2020-24: Preferred alternative selection and environmental documentation
- 2023-25: Preliminary design
- 2025-26: Design-Build final design
- 2026-32: Phased construction, with complete bridge closure 4-5 years

Major components of construction phase:

- Demolition of existing bridge
- Construction of Minnesota and Wisconsin approaches
- Construction of main navigation span
- Construction of new interchange in Wisconsin

NEPA PROCESS

MnDOT and WisDOT have engaged with stakeholders and the public to define the purpose and need of the project, evaluate alternatives and recommend an alternative. The team completed a major milestone in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process when the Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) was signed in March 2024. MnDOT and WisDOT continue to work closely with the Federal Highway Administration throughout the Blatnik Bridge project.

ALTERNATIVES

MnDOT and WisDOT studied five alternatives for the project and are moving forward with building Blatnik Bridge on the existing alignment with a shared-use path. The project includes an offset diamond interchange in Superior, with a direct connection to Hwy 53.





Need for Two Bridges in the Duluth/Superior Area

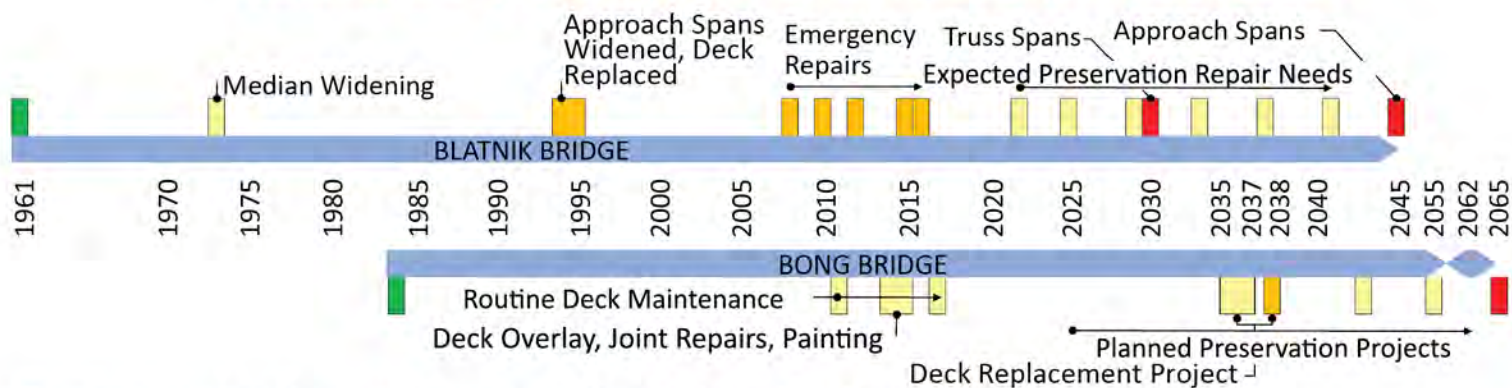
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The Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) and Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT) have initiated a planning and design study of the John A. Blatnik Bridge, which carries I-535 and US 53 traffic over the St. Louis Bay, to address concerns due to deteriorating bridge infrastructure and improve safety and traffic mobility. The other major bridge over the Duluth-Superior Harbor connecting these two cities is the Richard I. Bong Memorial Bridge, which carries US 2 traffic and is about five miles southwest of the Blatnik Bridge. There are several reasons that two bridges are needed in the Duluth-Superior area:

1. Most cities separated by bodies of water have more than one crossing to carry traffic and provide for emergency services. Other cities include St. Paul and Minneapolis in MN as well as other major US port cities such as Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, Seattle and San Francisco.
2. Both bridges are needed for the Duluth-Superior area to accommodate interstate freight and port access. The Bong Bridge would not adequately serve those needs alone. However, only loads of 40 tons or less currently are allowed on the Blatnik Bridge.
3. Approximately 33,100 vehicles per day use the Blatnik Bridge. That traffic would be added to the Bong Bridge's daily traffic of 16,100 vehicles if the Blatnik Bridge no longer was in operation and could cause traffic delays.
4. Periodic maintenance and bridge closures are required on the Blatnik and Bong bridges. If both the Bong and Blatnik bridges were closed for maintenance, then the next closest river crossing is the Oliver Bridge, which is approximately 26 miles round trip and is only viable for passenger vehicle traffic. The Bong Bridge is currently the only bridge crossing that allows heavy and wide trucks to cross in the Duluth-Superior area. If heavy and wide trucks are unable to use the Bong Bridge to cross, they must travel south to cross the St. Croix River between Hinckley, MN, and Danbury, WI. That trip is about 75 miles on the MN side and 50 miles on the WI side.

BLATNIK AND BONG BRIDGE MAINTENANCE & REPAIR SCHEDULE



Treatments are dependent on inspections and subject to change based on condition

- LEGEND**
- Bridge Opens
 - End of Service Life
 - Reduced Lanes with Periods of Complete Bridge Closure
 - Complete Bridge Closure



Project Map



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WEBSITES

🌐 www.dot.state.mn.us/d1/projects/blatnik-bridge/

🌐 wisconsindot.gov/Pages/projects/by-region/nw/blatnikbridge



Benefits of Constructing the New Bridge on the Existing Alignment



Provides Shortest Overall Construction Duration

Following the existing bridge alignment will provide the shortest construction duration since crews can work on any portion of the bridge while it's closed to traffic. An offset alignment would require multiple project phases that would result in a longer construction duration.



Eliminates Risk of Construction Near Motorists

Closing the existing bridge during construction improves the safety for construction workers and motorists traveling through the project area and provides more options for construction access.



Minimizes Impacts to Properties and Wetlands

Following the existing bridge alignment minimizes impacts to adjacent wetlands and properties.



Lowest Cost

Building an offset alignment would result in about 10% higher total project costs due to additional right-of-way costs and longer overall construction duration.

Preferred Alternative Selection Process

Since project development began in 2020, many alternatives have been considered against the project purpose and need and evaluation criteria. The process was broken into several steps, documented in technical reports available in Appendix F of the Environment Assessment document on the project website, to allow for public and agency input at key decision points. The table on the right summarizes the alternatives that were considered as part of this process and key findings.

Alternative Studied	Findings
Rehabilitation of existing bridge	It is not reasonably feasible to extend the service life of the existing bridge.
Tunnel connection underneath St. Louis River	Maintenance, operational, and security concerns were identified in addition to larger SEE* impacts relative to bridge options.
Bridge concepts along Connors Point	Larger SEE impacts relative to concepts adjacent to or within the existing bridge location.
West alignment	Performed poorly due to higher amount of right-of-way impacts to limited waterfront/slip access properties.
East alignment	
East/existing combination alignment	
West/existing combination alignment - bifurcated	Conflicts with vehicle mobility and freight navigation needs while offering limited cost or SEE benefit.
Low profile bridge (relative to existing bridge)	

*SEE: social, economic, and/or environmental

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WEBSITES

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MANAGING TRAFFIC DURING BRIDGE REPLACEMENT PROJECT

Knowing adjustments to traffic are going to need to be made to keep traffic flowing during construction, the Minnesota and Wisconsin Departments of Transportation studied multiple routes in Duluth and Superior and have identified possible changes. Final mitigation strategies will be determined through the design-build process.



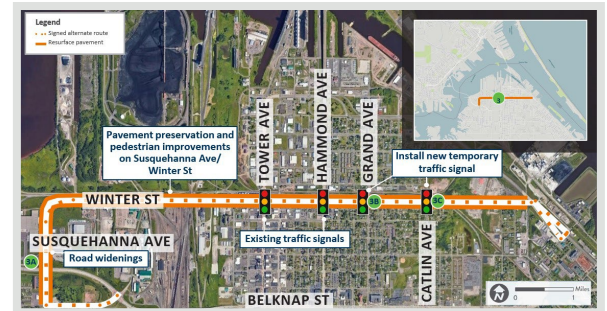
POTENTIAL TRAFFIC MITIGATION STRATEGIES - DULUTH

1. South 46th Avenue/US 2/I-35 entrance ramp intersection
 - Install temporary traffic signals
2. North 46th Avenue/West 8th Avenue intersection
 - Install temporary traffic signals

POTENTIAL TRAFFIC MITIGATION STRATEGIES - SUPERIOR

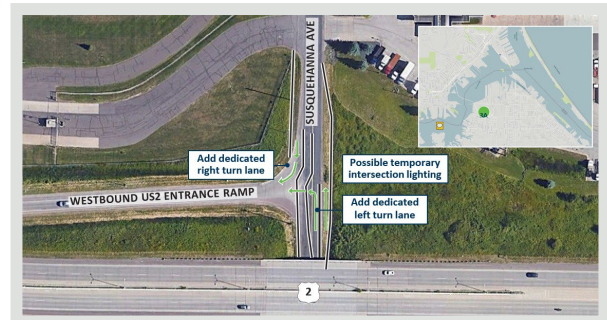
3. Winter Street and Susquehanna Avenue

- Resurface Winter Street from US 53 to Susquehanna Avenue
- Resurface Susquehanna Avenue from Winter Street to Belknap Street



3a: Susquehanna Avenue and westbound US 2

- Widen the road for turn lanes
- Add dedicated right- and left-turn lanes from Susquehanna to the westbound US 2 entrance ramp
- Add temporary intersection lighting



3b. Winter Street and Grand Avenue

- Install temporary traffic signals



3c. Winter Street and Catlin Avenue

- Install temporary traffic signals



4. Belknap Street from Banks to Tower and Ogden avenues

- Lengthen left-turn lanes on Belknap Street to Tower Avenue
- Restrict left turns from Belknap Street to northbound Ogden Avenue and southbound Banks Avenue to improve traffic flow

