

THE STILLWATER BRIDGE STORY



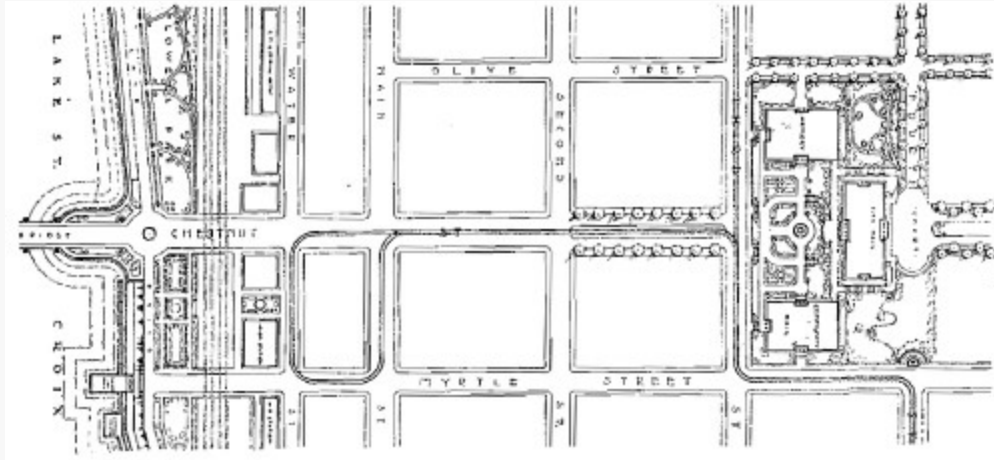
1931 Stillwater Bridge

Part I: The Backstory Behind the Bridge

Undoubtedly the highest profile road project in Minnesota is the new bridge at Stillwater, the St. Croix Crossing. (The project was originally known officially as the Stillwater-Houlton Bridge, or colloquially just the Stillwater Bridge, before the present name). Although there is a lot of current information available, the concept for a new bridge goes back three generations, with information getting hard to find the farther back you go, so this is Part I of a planned series of four posts to provide this history. At this point arguing about the merits or lack of merits is “water under the bridge” so rather than be an opinion piece this is intended to be more of a factual overview. There are some rather hyperbolic opinions that officials have stated that I repeat as part of the the history of the project, and I have tried to restrain my own enthusiasm for the project.

The 1931 Bridge

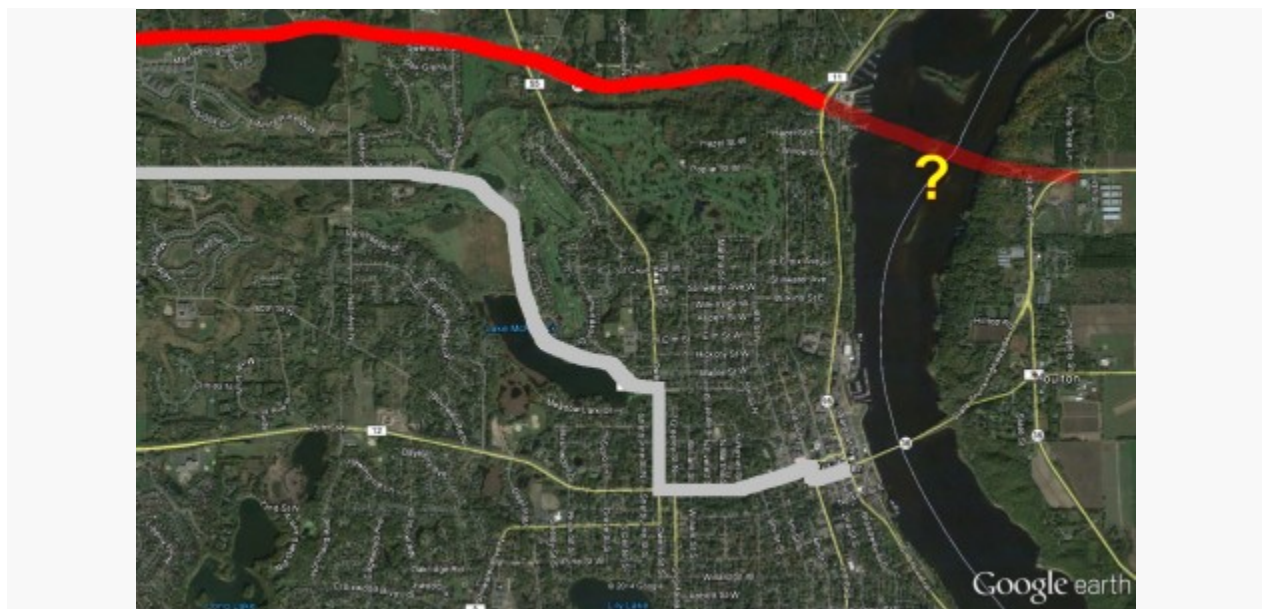
To begin, it’s interesting to take a step back and back and see that history repeats itself. The current structure built in 1931 was viewed as the ultimate solution to an ongoing problem. It was the result of decades of lobbying by the city to replace an inadequate, deteriorating structure and controversy over cost and location. Also interesting is the 1918 Stillwater City Plan which envisioned a grand rounds parkways system, a state park from downtown to Taylor’s Falls, and a majestic town square style municipal campus on the hill in line with the 1931 bridge.



Stillwater "Municipal Campus" proposal with the city hall, armory, courthouse, and community hall.

1950s Plans

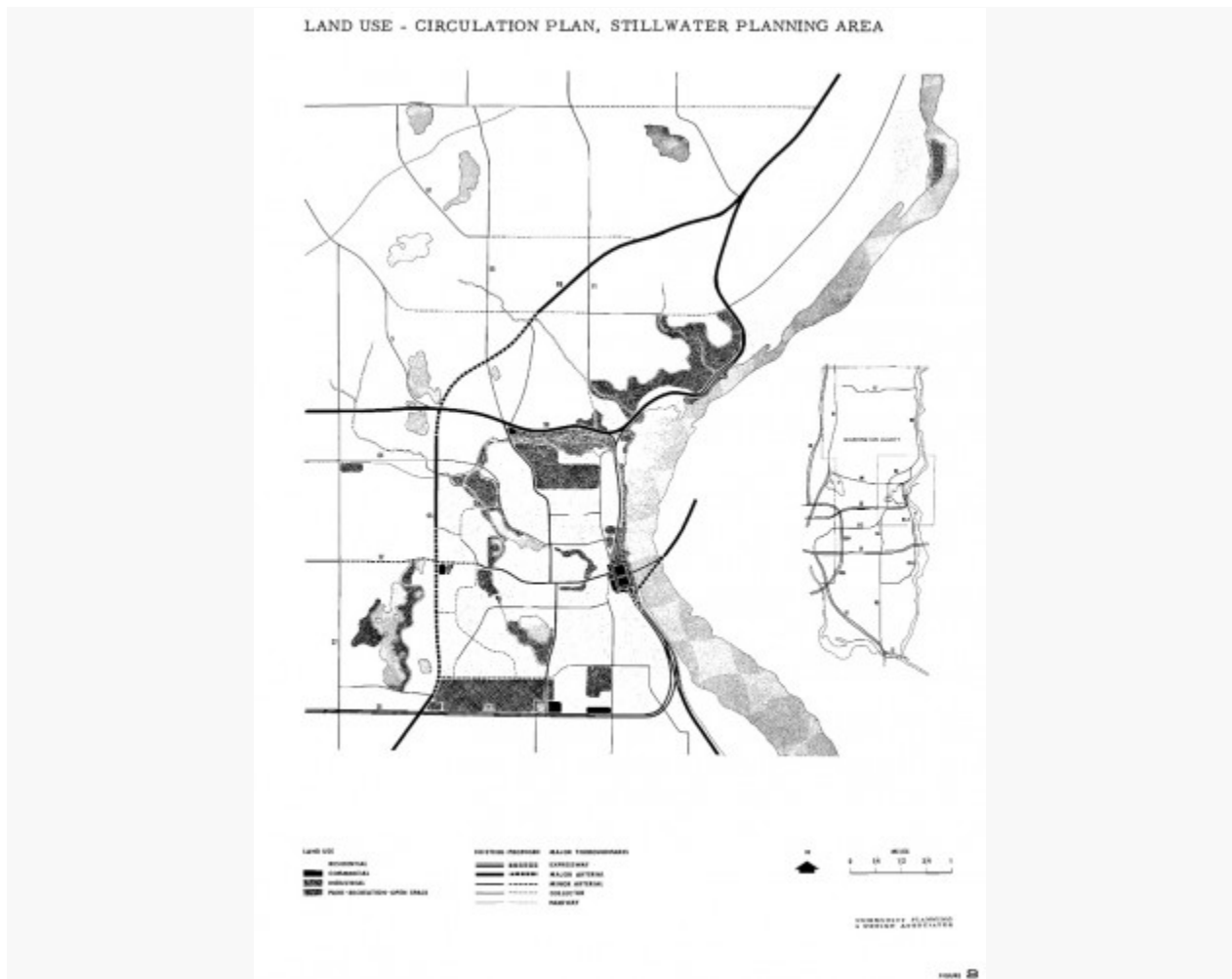
Only a generation later, with exploding post-war vehicle traffic, it was obvious the 1931 bridge was going to be inadequate for vehicle traffic in the future, and planning started for a replacement. I have no documentation, but at a public meeting for the new bridge, some old-timers were mentioning about how MnDOT was finally "keeping their promise to the town" and that the original "High Bridge" proposal was north of town. Around 1950 MN Highway 96, which formerly went through the center of town, was bypassed to the north. Directly across from the new ending was a curve in WI Highway 64, so although I have no documentation it's not much of a stretch to think that a new bridge was intended to go here.



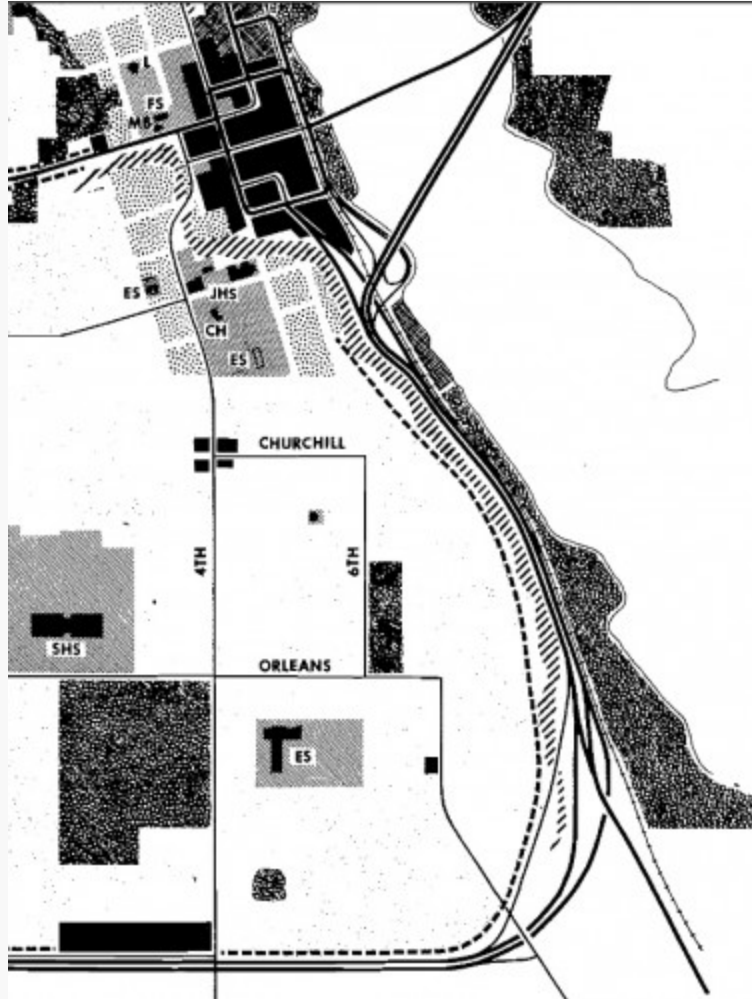
MN 96 rerouting, old route in gray and new route in red. Was MN 96 to extend across the river?

1960s and 1970s Plans

By the time the 1961 Stillwater Comprehensive Plan came out, the new bridge was proposed in more or less the original location. The four lane MN Highway 212 (As the MN Highway 36 east of Stillwater Boulevard was then numbered) had recently been bypassed around Lookout Trail, and would have been extended to the new bridge. Since the railroad was still in use, likely this would have required substantial cuts and retaining walls into the bluff. There also would have been a “ring road” system around downtown Stillwater, presumably wide, suburban-style roads, and also discussion of extending Manning Avenue and relocating MN Highway 95 onto it as a north-south bypass. Also interesting was this comment: “Originally the new bridge was seen to be constructed after 1980. It now appears it may possibly become a reality by 1970”.



1961 proposal for the Stillwater area showing a westerly bypass of MN 95.



1961 proposal for the downtown area and the connection to the MN 36 freeway.



What might have been. The new “ring road” system is in red and the footprint for the new freeway interchange and the bridge is in yellow.

With a wide, suburban-style road between the city and the river, the result would have been something like downtown Shakopee is now. And the interchange would have precluded any parkland south of downtown—although at the time the area was still in use by heavy industry.

A 1966 suggestion of a double left turn lane coming off the bridge combined with removing parking on Main Street wasn’t implemented either.

A 1969 article in the internal Department of Highways magazine “Minnesota Highways” notes that a new bridge would “undoubtedly be built at a different location” because of flooding (although that may mean just the few blocks difference). The replacement cost estimate was \$5,154,000 and the daily traffic total was 7,000, with replacement proposed 1975-1980. And there’s the suggestion the old bridge was already becoming a maintenance headache.

The 1972 Stillwater Comprehensive Plan dropped the ring roads in favor of a one way pair with Main and Water Streets, and is mum on the location of a new bridge. But the plan notes that most of the traffic problems in downtown are caused by the current location of the bridge, with the comment that on weekends Stillwater, “can be engulfed in traffic snarls typical of New York or Los Angeles.”

The 1979 plan notes the long term goal is to build interchanges along MN Highway 36, along with noting the “much discussed bridge hasn’t had a location selected, nor funding before 1990 at the earliest”, and notes drivers are cutting through residential areas to avoid “severe congestion” on the arterial streets. It wasn’t until the 1980s that talk and vague plans lurched forward into potential reality.

The 1985 Draft Study, 1990 DEIS, and 1995 Final EIS

Things got moving for real in 1985 with the St. Croix River Crossing Draft Study Outline and Scoping Document. Originally there were seven options: A north bridge or tunnel, a new bridge at the current location, a new bridge just south of the current location, a new bridge or tunnel south of town, or building a drawbridge instead of a high bridge at any of the above bridge locations. Building a new drawbridge was dropped immediately due to traffic issues, and building a high bridge at the existing location was dropped due to the extreme disruption of the freeway approach being routed along Stillwater Boulevard, and Olive Street. Carried forward to the 1990 Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) were the remaining three bridge and two tunnel alternatives.

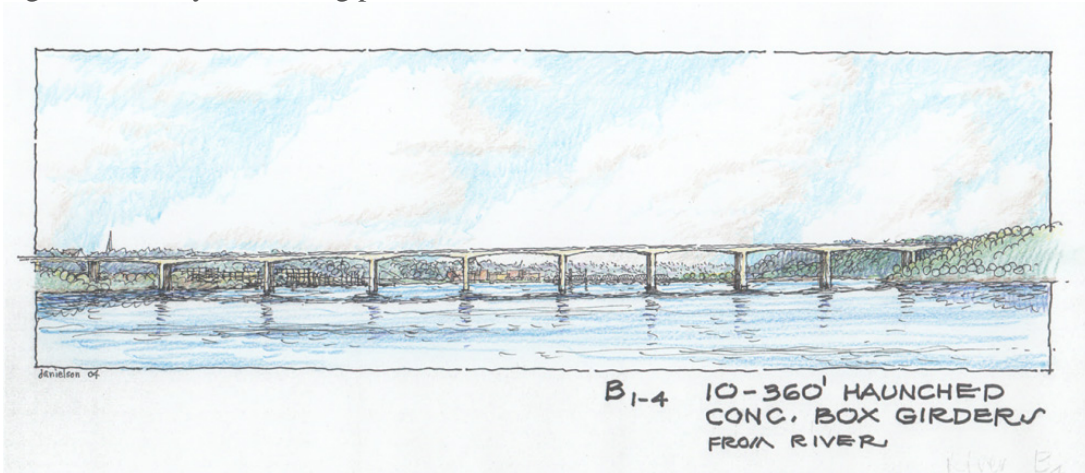


1985 Study Proposals, with the potential freeway approach roads in gray. I'm assuming only freeway approaches were considered due to traffic projections were such that there would be operational problems even with wide suburban-style roads.

The two tunnel alternatives were rejected due to environmental damage, restrictions on trucks, steep grades (5%), and costs. The North Alignment was rejected due to the excessive new construction required south and west of Stillwater, that north of town is when the river actually becomes more wild and scenic, and impacts to environmental and historic resources. I'll also throw out the observations that it would have shifted the costs even more disproportionately to Minnesota (each state is responsible for 50% of the bridge structure, but 100% of the cost of their approach roads), and it would be a roundabout way for the "Walmart and Applebee's" crowd from Wisconsin to get to the existing suburban strip south of town. It might have even resulted in a new round of suburban-style development along the new freeway, and/or such traffic cutting through the downtown area.

The Central Alignment (either a new four-lane bridge or a new two lane eastbound only) was rejected due to the damage to the bluffs and existing and proposed parkland a new freeway would cause between downtown Stillwater and the existing highway south of town. The aesthetic concerns of bridge high enough to allow river traffic near the old bridge and the downtown area was another reason the central alignment was discarded. As a side note, there was an option of a short tunnel to lessen the impact to the bluffs on either the central or south alignments.

Thus the 1995 Final EIS was when the choice was locked in the choice of a bluff-spanning bridge on the South Alignment. The estimated cost was \$88 million dollars in 1990, rising to \$120 million dollars in 1995; this was before years of construction inflation and included none of the expensive mitigation items as what's being built. The goal was to be as unobtrusive as possible to the natural surroundings, and specifically to avoid any structures that could be seen outside of the valley, so a low-key girder design was chosen. The haunched girders (with small curves to them) gave it at least a tiny bit of flair. As a side note, I recently asked an engineer how much it would have cost to build a generic girder bridge instead of the current design. He refused to speculate, but noted that although choosing an extradosed span was entirely aesthetic, there was at least some engineering justification, that being the difficulty of building piers on the St. Croix



River.



Rendering of the 1995 design from the scenic overlook.

But of course this never got built, as the gears were turning to get it built, gears were also turning to stop it, and as they collided they meshed into a jam, with the project neither proceeding nor permanently dropped for the next 15 years. In June 1996 environmental groups sued the federal government to stop the bridge, and succeeded in a ruling that was finalized in April 1998. It appeared the project was dead in the water. But bridge supporters would not give up. Part II will deal with some other designs that went nowhere and the initial development of the current design, Part III will deal with later refinements to the current design, my own suggestions, and some loose ends, and Part IV will go beyond the bridge to the future of downtown Stillwater.

Source : <http://streets.mn/2015/02/07/the-stillwater-bridge-story/>