

REDISCOVER VETERANS MEMORIAL BRIDGE

Summary of Community Input

June 23-24, 2023



Photo: Robert Walter

INTRODUCTION

On June 23-24, 2023, Cuyahoga County re-opened the streetcar level of the Veterans Memorial Bridge to the public for self-guided tours and community conversations about programming the space in the future. About 10,000 people participated in two days of events and shared a wide range of ideas for the bridge. Over 800 people completed an online survey to share their experiences on the bridge.

In summary, most people wanted the subway level of the bridge to be open to the public on an on-going basis. Walking and biking were the most frequently requested activities for the bridge, although a small but vocal percentage of participants wanted to see trolley service restored on the lower level. Many people want to see the history of the bridge preserved and highlighted through signage, programs, and the restoration of original lighting and masonry. There was also support for softening the experience of the bridge with plants and landscaping. Many people suggested a haunted house on the bridge, holiday lights, and other seasonal programming. Cafes, restaurants, and shopping were also requested.

Many people cited safety concerns, the need for better lighting, and security systems including call boxes and security cameras. There were very few comments about the need for restrooms, ADA accessibility, and parking although these issues will need to be addressed if the streetcar level of the bridge will be open to the public on a permanent basis.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community members had multiple opportunities to share their thoughts and experiences on the bridge, including facilitated conversations, comment panels, information kiosks, a survey, and a bike focus group.

- Over 1,000 people participated in a Community Conversation & Cookout on the bridge on June 23, 2023.
- 15 people participated in a bike focus group on the bridge on June 24, 2023.
- Approximately 9,300 participated in self-guided tours, exploration, and activities on the bridge on June 24, 2023
- 856 people completed an online survey about their visit to the bridge, including ideas about how they would like to see the streetcar level of the bridge used in the future.
- Seven people participated in a preliminary accessibility audit of the streetcar level space.

Community Conversation & Cookout - June 23, 2023

The County hosted a free community cookout at the bridge and invited nearby neighbors and other visitors to talk with a team of facilitators, discussing a range of questions including:

1. The bridge's official name is the Veterans Memorial Bridge. Do you think the streetcar level space should have its own name? If so, what do you think it should be?

Many participants referred to the bridge as the Detroit-Superior Bridge. Participants discussed some of the names for the streetcar level, including the Low Line, Sky Park, and the Underbridge, but there were no strong opinions or clear consensus about what the streetcar level of the bridge should be called.

2. How do you use the upper (street) level of the bridge: driving, walking, riding a bike and what's the experience like? Do you have ideas for the streetcar level? Should it be primarily a bike and walking path? Or more like a park in the sky with green space? Or a place for music, performances, and festivals? A space that's filled with public art? A play space? Should it have a cafe or restaurant? Or something else?

There was strong support for a walking path on the streetcar level of the bridge, and for having the space open to the public on a regular basis. Some participants stressed the importance of preserving the history of the bridge and using signage and exhibitions in the space to help people understand Cleveland's history. Others were interested in seeing the space used for sports and entertainments, suggesting ziplines, play spaces, bars, restaurants, and arcades.

3. Do you think the lower level space should be open 24/7 like a public street, or only during daytime and evening hours?

Perhaps because this event was held in the evening, many conversations focused on night-time activities. Most participants seem to envision the streetcar level of the bridge more as a community space than a public street, although most people support the idea of bike and walking paths to get people from one side of the bridge to the other.

4. Are there things that could be on the bridge that would make you feel like the space is for you versus a tourist attraction for out-of-towners? What would those things be?
Most participants didn't make a distinction between amenities and activities on the bridge for neighborhood residents versus tours. Some discussed the possibility of a trolley that would go back and forth across the streetcar level of the bridge as a fun activity for visitors.
5. Is there anything that worries you about this project? Do you have any specific ideas for addressing those concerns?
Security concerns were raised by many participants, especially if the bridge will be open 24/7. Participants suggested security cameras, call boxes, safety patrols, and better lighting.
6. How familiar are you with plans for Irishtown Bend Park and Canal Basin Park? Do you see opportunities to connect the streetcar level of the bridge with these new public spaces?
Some participants were aware of plans for Irishtown Bend and Canal Basin Park but didn't have specific ideas for making connections - perhaps because these new green spaces don't exist yet and it's hard for people to envision the connections, especially since both spaces will be along the river, far below the bridge. As plans progress for Irishtown Bend and Canal Basin Park, possible connections to the bridge could be explored through walking tours, interactive models, and other community engagement efforts.

Additional input from the Community Conversation is included in the Community Wish List section, beginning on page 12.



Facilitator Team

Bike Focus Group - June 24, 2023

A 15-person bike focus group rode across the bridge to discuss ideas for making the streetcar level more bike and pedestrian friendly, and for making connections to nearby neighborhoods and public spaces.



Bike focus group

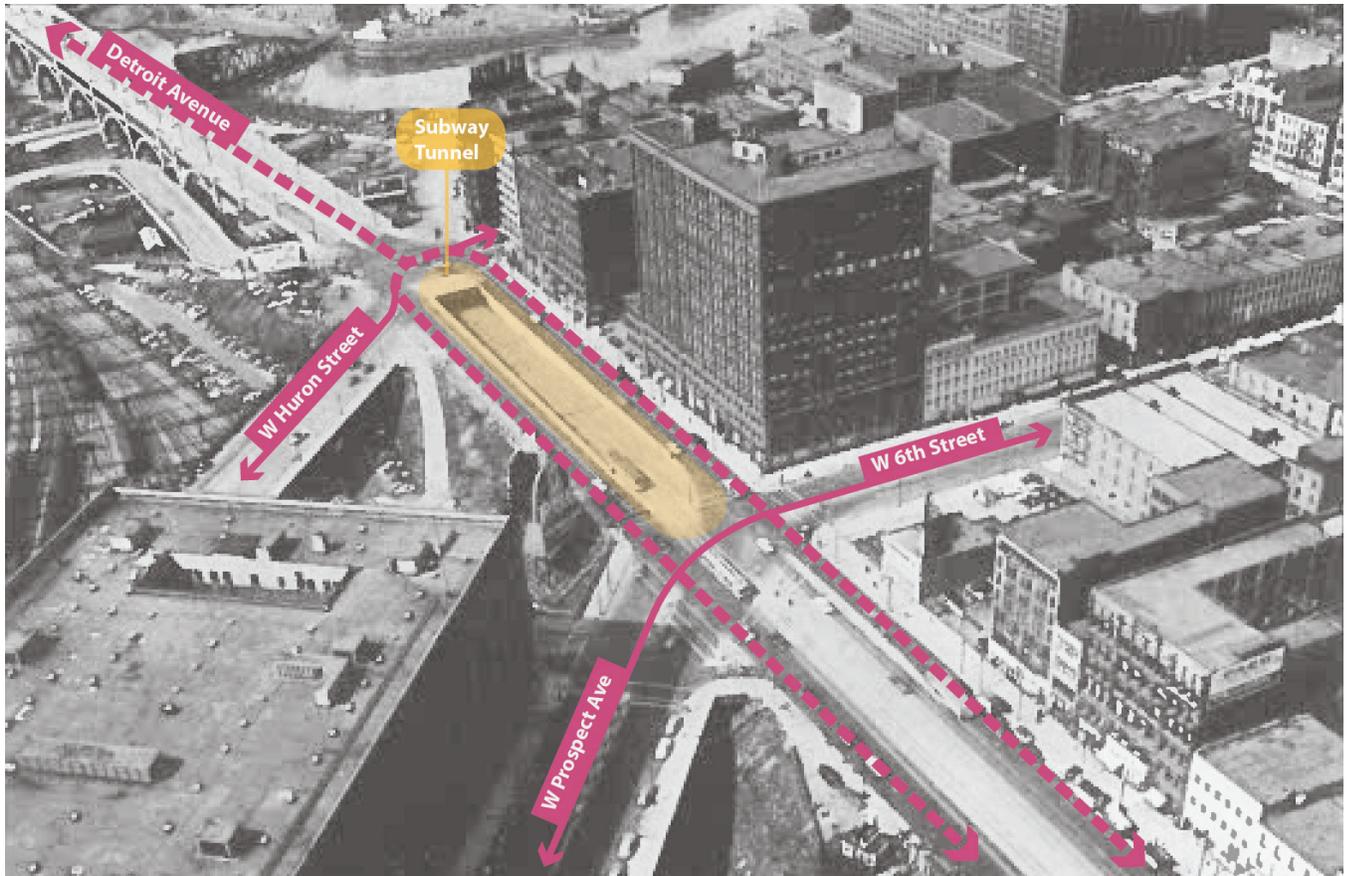
The ride took place before the bridge was open to the public. It would not have been possible for the group to ride safely across the bridge later in the day, with thousands of pedestrians in the space. As part of the process for the 2013 Transportation for Livable Communities Initiative (TLCI) Plan, temporary bike lanes were created on the streetcar level of the bridge with duct tape. These lanes clearly delineated areas for pedestrians and cyclists. This installation demonstrated that on a typical day, the space can be safely shared by both groups. But on days with festivals, installations, or events, bike traffic may need to be prohibited.



Temporary bike lane and pedestrian path from 2013 Transportation for Livable Communities Initiative Plan

The speed and volume of traffic (cars and trucks) on the street level of the bridge was raised as a concern. The streetcar level could provide a safer, quieter way to get across the river by bike and on foot. Focus group participants enjoyed riding across the bridge, with its great views and cool breezes. Participants suggested that public art and vegetation would enhance the experience of the bridge

The focus group discussed how the streetcar level of the bridge could be accessed at the eastern end. Group members had no problem getting to the eastern entrance off West Superior Avenue on a low-traffic Saturday morning. But many people noted that the intersection immediately east of the bridge at W. Huron Road, W. 9th Street, and Detroit Avenue can be difficult and dangerous to navigate on a bike due to high traffic and drivers who routinely ignore the bike traffic signal. There was some discussion about reopening the subway tunnel at the east end of the bridge to bring cyclists under the intersection and out to a center median bike lane that could link up with the Superior Midway at Public Square.



Historic view of open well on Superior Avenue, where an existing tunnel could transition to a center median with a protected bike lane. (photo by Robert Runyan, Bruce Young collection, from *The History of the Veterans Memorial Bridge*, William Beyer)

The group also talked about making the section of West Superior Avenue (the road leading to the existing entrance on the east side of the bridge) a pedestrian/bike only street between W. 9th Street and Robert Lockwood Jr. Drive. They also discussed a recommendation in the 2013 TLCI plan to create an opening on the streetcar level of the bridge from the southeast corner, through the parking lot that serves the Federal Courthouse, noting that this could create opportunities for the parking lot site, which appears to be underused.

The deck at the center span of the bridge could be widened to the edges of the cantilevers, creating more room for bikes, pedestrians, and other activities. But railings/fencing would be needed at the edges to keep people from throwing things off the bridge. The group asked why a fence treatment is required for some bridges (Veterans Memorial Bridge) and not for others (Lorain-Carnegie Bridge). Participants suggested safety nets below to preserve views of the river, downtown, and the industrial valley, rather than railings which would block these views.



Current conditions at the center span.



Design concept for the center span of the bridge with the deck extending to the edges of the bridge, creating space for pedestrians, cyclists, and seating. A railing treatment is shown at the edges for safety. (2019 TLCI Plan Update)

Many people would like to see plants, trees, and vegetation on the streetcar level of the bridge. The Highline in New York City was frequently cited as a model for what people are envisioning here. But the Highline was created from a vacant bridge, unlike the Veterans Memorial Bridge which is an active part of the city street network. Plants on the bridge would need to be shade tolerant and would need lighting, irrigation, and maintenance. The weight of soil and lack of light would probably preclude trees on the streetcar deck, but could be planted in public areas around the entry points to the bridge. Perhaps landscaping could be focused in certain areas on the streetcar level by the bridge, supported by a potential landscape fund or endowment. At least one visitor suggested moving car traffic to the lower level of the bridge and transforming the upper space to a public park and green space. This is a creative, though perhaps unrealistic way to create a park-like landscape on the bridge.



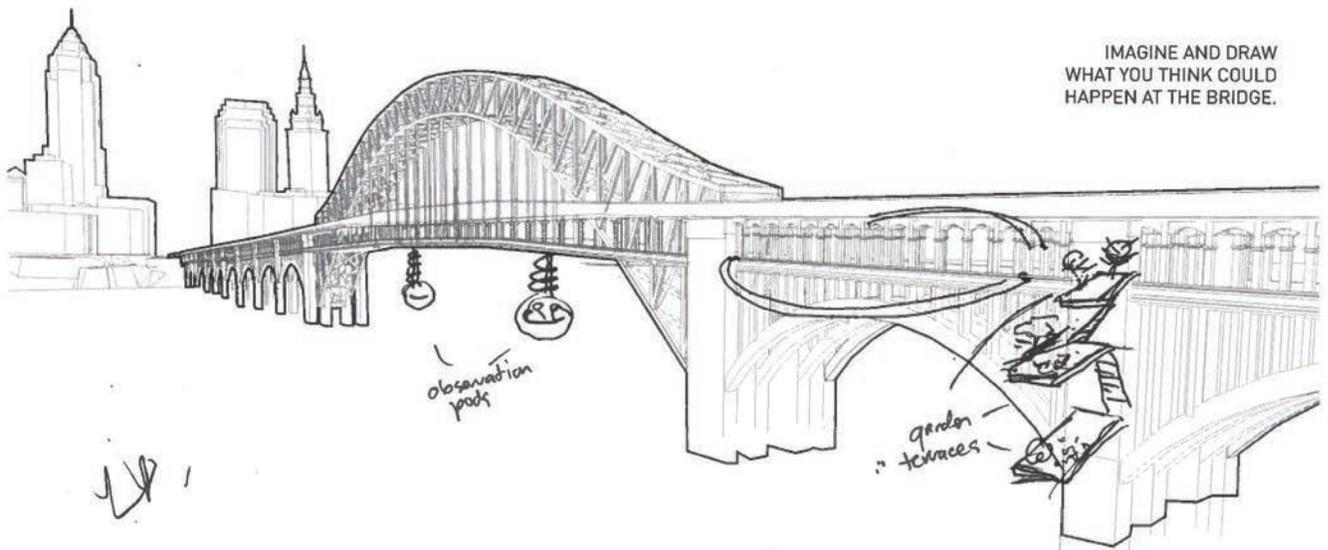
The Highline, New York City



REDISCOVER THE VETERANS MEMORIAL BRIDGE

WHAT'S NEXT?

IMAGINE AND DRAW
WHAT YOU THINK COULD
HAPPEN AT THE BRIDGE.



Community member's ideas for adding landscaped terraces and an observation pod to the Veterans Memorial bridge.

Bridge Survey - June & July, 2023

856 people completed a survey after their visit to the bridge. The Friday night event was promoted most heavily to people who live in the neighborhoods near the bridge, although all were welcome to attend. The Saturday event was open to all.

- 98 survey respondents visited the bridge on Friday night (June 23, 2023)
- 685 respondents visited the bridge on Saturday (June 24, 2024)
- 19 survey respondents visited the bridge both Friday and Saturday.
- 54 survey respondents did not participate in Rediscover Veterans Memorial Bridge but had visited the streetcar level of the bridge previously.

Survey respondents listed their home zip codes.

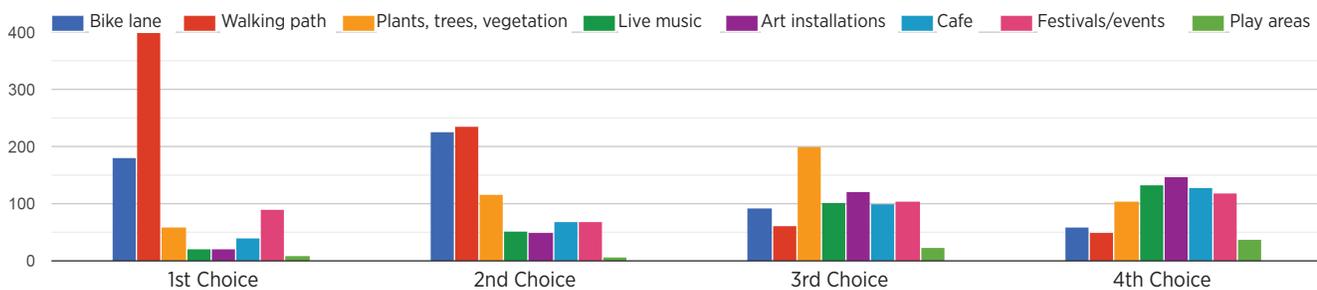
- 25% of survey respondents from Friday night live in the neighborhoods near the bridge.
- 9% of respondents who visited on Saturday live in the nearby neighborhoods.

Of all survey respondents:

- 13% live in the neighborhoods near the bridge
- 18% live elsewhere in Cleveland
- 18% live in Cleveland’s inner-ring suburbs
- 20% live elsewhere in Cuyahoga County
- 19% live outside of Cuyahoga County, but in Northeast Ohio
- 2% live elsewhere in Ohio or out-of-state

These numbers represent only the bridge visitors who completed the survey. For a more complete understanding of where bridge visitors come from, a zip code line could be added to the liability release form that everyone must complete before entering the bridge.

Survey respondents ranked their priorities for the streetcar level space. A walking path was the top priority, followed by a bike lane.

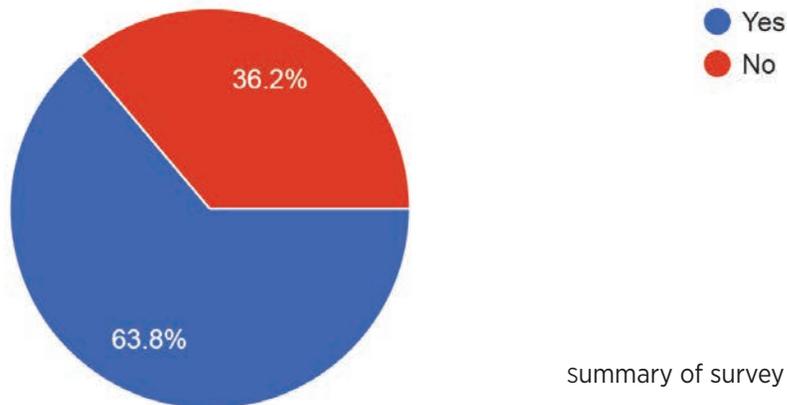


About one-third of survey respondents thought that the bridge is not a good place for children, currently. Most cited safety concerns including uneven surfaces, gaps in the plywood over the center span of the bridge, and temporary snow fencing to keep visitors out of off-limits areas. Some children and adults expressed a fear of heights, especially at the center span.

There were many families with children on the bridge during the event. A strong volunteer presence helped and on-site EMS team kept the space safe for all. Many visitors complimented the County's extensive clean-up efforts in preparation for the event.

Do you think the lower level of the bridge is a good place to bring kids currently?

791 responses



summary of survey responses

Many participants raised safety concerns, particularly if the bridge will be open to the public 24 hours a day, year-round. Better lighting, call boxes, security cameras, and a staffing program like Downtown Cleveland Ambassadors were among the ideas suggested to address security issues. The length of the bridge was perceived by some as a barrier, since there is no way to get off mid way. At least one participant suggested creating an opening with stairs to the street level of the bridge at several places along the span.

Additional community input from the Friday night conversation, the bike focus group, the comment walls and kiosks, and the community survey are compiled in the following section.

COMMUNITY WISH LIST

The community engagement process was intentionally open-ended. Community members were encouraged to think creatively and share their ideas. Ideas from all of the community engagement efforts (dinner conversations, survey, comments on kiosks and idea walls) include:

General ideas

- Open to the public - daily access for free, with a donation or a small fee
- Implement dreams/plans already paid for (2013 TICI plan)
- Sell bridge t-shirts and other merchandise
- Draw inspiration from Ponte Vecchio in Florence Italy, the 606 path in Chicago and the High Line in New York City
- Structural and day-to-day maintenance are essential
- Think about elderly people in the design
- Concerns about gentrification
- Concerns about overuse of the bridge (more than special events)
- Questions about funding
- An over-designed space would feel artificial
- Restrooms
- Nearby parking
- Heaters so the space could be used during the winter

Popular ideas - most frequently mentioned

- Pedestrian/bike path
- Need for more lighting
- Haunted house
- Trees & plants - harness water runoff from road above
- Park area / playground
- Observation deck/Sunset deck
- Highlight the history of Cleveland and the bridge
- Places to gather, places to rest, seating

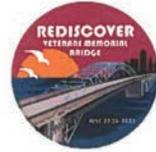
Technology

- Augmented reality views + information on anything visible from the bridge, including other bridges, buildings, and businesses with clickable historic views.
- Blue light / security centers
- Make it brighter especially at night
- Wi-fi

Food & Drink

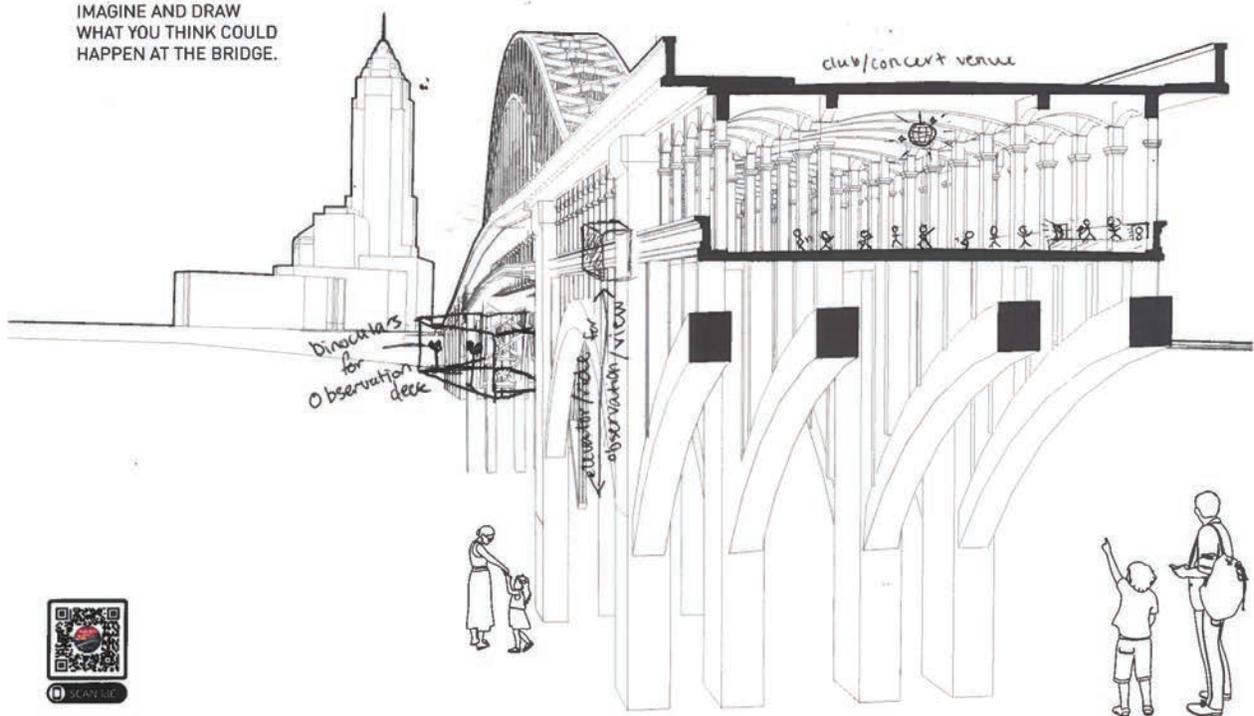
- Bridge as Designated Outdoor Refreshment Area (DORA)
- Food trucks, kiosks, stations
- Food hall
- Ice cream stand
- Sit down restaurant (year-round or seasonal)
- Basic restaurant infrastructure that can be used for short-term restaurants and catered events
- Outdoor cafe or coffee/bars along the edges

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Community member's ideas for a nightclub with observation deck

- Bar/nightclub/pub (possibly in conjunction with tenant in former Massimo's space)
- Farmers market / vendor market
- Water station for dogs & people
- Streetcar diner



Farmers market concept [Nadja Korbut and Anastasia Vaynberg, Cleveland Design Competition]

Retail

- Flea market
- Small scale retail, stores, underground mall
- Stay away from retail due to lack of visibility and daily foot traffic
- Rent space for pop ups



Pop up retail on the bridge [2013 Transportation for Livable Communities Initiative Plan]

Activities

- Biking, walking, running
- Year-round play area for children and teens
- Bowling
- Pool tables
- Arcade
- Yoga classes
- Dog park/dog walks
- Geocaching
- Yard games
- Exercise stations along the way/workout zones
- Recreation in winter weather
- Virtual reality
- Roller skating
- Skate park
- Disk golf course
- Mini golf
- Pickleball
- Bungee jumping
- Ninja warrior course
- Amusement park w/ roller coasters

Connections

- Bike path, bike access ramp, bike rental station
- Scooters and e-bikes
- Walking path
- Moving walkway - like at the airport
- Bring the trolley back - free rides across the bridge
- Bring trolley back and combine trolley service with existing rail (Red Line)
- Elevators, observation/glass elevator
- Glass floor for observation
- Creative staircases
- Zipline

Arts & culture

- Music/concerts/performance
- Nothing loud
- Theater
- Poetry readings, story space
- Sip & paint
- Art displays/installations, arts center, studio space, residency space, community classes
- Cool museum / Mini museum
- Commemorate veterans
- Light shows
- Space for local artists to spray paint/create
- Paid cultural events
- Sound panels
- Festivals
- Rent the space to different churches weekly
- Photo shoot location, permanent photo spots
- Historical tours
- Ballroom
- Fashion shows/venue
- Children's museum

Special Events

- Open more frequently
- Oktoberfest
- Haunted house / ghost hunting / hayride
- Holiday season festivities - lighting, Higbee window displays
- Movie nights at sunset
- Trivia night
- Field trips
- Wedding venue
- Guided tours - focused on history and/or future plans for the bridge. Interactive tours.
- Movie set
- Free activities for youth
- Movable stages
- Races
- Wedding venue
- Make the bridge a functional element of the environment for special occasions - i.e. game scores projected on bridge
- Circus
- Parades, Veterans Day Parade
- Annual city potluck
- History days
- Ethnic festivals

Social Services

- Community donations / distribution of toys and food
- Homeless shelter
- Emergency shelter - cooling center during heat waves
- Kitchen space, especially for unhoused people
- Year-round reading room

Signage

- Subway tiles with donor names
- Signage - more information memorialized
- QR codes to inform people about the history of the bridge, the city, and Indigenous people
- Wayfinding

Other ideas

- Glass floors / transparent floor panels
- Bat houses
- School
- Housing on the bridge
- Hotel rooms on the bridge

Preliminary Accessibility Audit - August 14, 2023

Maximum Accessible Housing of Ohio (MaxHousing) organized a preliminary accessibility audit of the streetcar level of the bridge. Participants included members of Cuyahoga County's Advisory Committee on Persons with Disabilities.

The streetcar level of the bridge does not meet Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards in its current form, but the County makes accommodations for events so people using wheelchairs or strollers can attend. All future improvements to the bridge will be designed to ADA standards.

The preliminary accessibility audit was an opportunity for an early look at the space, to identify ways the space can be more welcoming and inclusive for events in the short-term, and some issues to consider when permanent improvements are planned.

Members of the group enjoyed being in the space and discussed the importance of preserving its historic and architectural character as future investments are made.

Low lighting levels at the western end of the bridge pose challenges for people with vision loss. Uneven surfaces at the center span of the bridge are also challenging. During public events, volunteers or recorded warnings should alert visitors as they approach the center span that the pavement they are walking on is about to change to a series of plywood boards with gaps between them. On the south side of the span, the county has installed small ramps over these gaps to make them easier to cross for people with vision impairments and for people who use wheelchairs or strollers. The groups suggested that these ramps should also be installed on the north side of the span so they are available to people crossing in both directions. Volunteers or recorded alerts could advise people to move to the edge of the path if ramps were in place on both sides.



Ramps over the gaps between plywood sheets along the southern edge of the center span.

While discussing future connections from the subway level of the bridge to Irishtown Bend and Canal Basin Park, participants said that any ramps between the parks and the bridge should have a flat surface that people in wheelchairs could use to get out of the path of traffic.

Participants stressed the importance of getting input from people with disabilities throughout the planning and design to ensure that the space will be welcoming and inclusive to all.