

Date of Hearing: July 8, 2019

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION

Jim Frazier, Chair

SB 656 (Hueso) – As Amended May 24, 2019

**SENATE VOTE:** 38-0

**SUBJECT:** San Diego-Coronado Bridge: physical suicide deterrent system

**SUMMARY:** Requires the Director of the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) to form an advisory committee to provide input into the selection of a physical suicide deterrent system for the San Diego-Coronado Bridge. Specifically, **this urgency bill:**

- 1) Requires the Director of Caltrans to select members for an advisory committee to provide input into the selection of a physical suicide deterrent system for the San Diego-Coronado Bridge, including all of the following:
  - a) A representative from San Diego County;
  - b) A representative from the California Highway Patrol;
  - c) A representative from the City of San Diego;
  - d) A resident of San Diego;
  - e) A representative from the City of Coronado;
  - f) A resident of Coronado;
  - g) A mental health advocate;
  - h) A member of a local suicide prevention group; and
  - i) One representative for each Assembly Member and State Senator whose district includes the San Diego-Coronado Bridge, to be selected by that member.
- 2) Includes an urgency clause to take effect immediately upon enactment.

**EXISTING LAW:**

- 1) Assigns Caltrans the responsibility of operating and maintaining state highways and statutorily identifies state highway system routes.
- 2) Requires state and local transportation planning agencies to complete a number of assessments and reviews in order for a transportation project to be eligible for federal or state funding, such as a project initiation document which outlines a project's estimated scope, cost, and timeline.

- 3) Requires project initiation documents related to any new project involving the construction of a new bridge or the replacement of a bridge with a history of documented suicides to document that a suicide barrier was considered during the project's planning process.
- 4) Appropriates, in the 2019-2020 budget, \$5 million to advance suicide prevention measures on the San Diego-Coronado Bridge.

**FISCAL EFFECT:** According to the Senate Appropriations Committee, pursuant to Senate Rule 28.8, negligible state costs.

**COMMENTS:** A bridge suicide barrier is a physical barrier designed to prevent people from attempting suicide by jumping from a bridge. There are various types of barriers, including ones that are tall, fence-like structures that prevent people from easily jumping, or suicide nets extending horizontally below the bridge. Communities have often chosen to use suicide nets, despite their higher costs, in order to protect the aesthetics of the bridge.

After many years of study and negotiations, San Francisco Bay Area officials are constructing a suicide net for the Golden Gate Bridge estimated to cost \$211 million and be completed in 2021. The net being installed is actually 385,000 square feet of marine-grade stainless steel that will be stretched across 555 tons of steel supports 20 feet out and 20 feet under most of the bridge's 1.7 mile span. Proponents, sure that a net or some other physical add-on would help stop the 30 or so people per year who end their lives by jumping off the San Francisco landmark, worked with those concerned about the aesthetic impact as well as the potential for any major addition to affect the bridge's structural integrity in order to find a design that served the intent yet did not detract from the beauty that draws millions of tourists each year.

According to the author, the San Diego-Coronado Bridge has unfortunately become a frequent site for suicide attempts, second only to the Golden Gate Bridge in California. The San Diego-Coronado Bridge is about two miles long, part of State Route 75 connecting the Logan Heights neighborhood of San Diego with the City of Coronado. It was a toll bridge until 2002, after which tolls were discontinued. The bridge spans San Diego Bay between the mouth of the bay and Naval Base San Diego. Bicycles and pedestrians are not permitted on the bridge.

The author states, "The Coronado Bridge is recognized as the second most frequently used bridge for suicides in the United States and has had as many as 19 suicides per year. Non-physical measures for suicide deterrence have been implemented on the bridge including signage for suicide counseling hotlines as well as increased presence and monitoring by the California Highway Patrol. More recently, bird spikes were placed on the sides of the bridge in an effort to deter suicides. However, within weeks of their installation, three suicides occurred over a 24-hour period and a fourth attempt was made that same week. Caltrans issued a feasibility report last year outlining the potential options of creating a permanent physical barrier to completely prevent individuals from gaining access to the bridge's edge. Caltrans has stated it may take years to agree, approve and install a barrier on the bridge. Nonetheless, it is critical that the planning process continue to move expeditiously. Senate Bill 656 will ensure input provided by a broad section of regional stakeholders will help inform the selection process and lead to a decision that best meets the needs of the community. More importantly, this bill will give community stakeholders the opportunity to provide feedback as Caltrans continues to review possible long-term solutions to help prevent these lamentable deaths."

Writing in support, San Diego County states, “Suicide attempts on the bridge are not the only threat to public safety. The bridge’s 34 inch high barrier railings, which allow for unobstructed views while crossing the bridge, do not prevent vehicles and debris from plummeting off the side of the bridge. Suicided, attempted suicides, and traffic safety issues result in the bridge being closed regularly for hours, causing traffic congestion that delay civilian and military personnel.”

Studies have shown that a well-designed suicide barrier can stop people from jumping at a particular site, but it can be difficult to prove that the presence of a suicide barrier will actually lower the overall suicide rate in the surrounding area. For example, one study of the effects of a bridge suicide barrier showed that after the installation at the Bloor Street Viaduct in Toronto, the rate of jumping from other bridges in the area increased and there was no decrease in the overall jumping rate. However, further studies demonstrated that, over the long term, suicide-by-jumping declined in Toronto after the barrier was installed with no associated increase in suicide by other means. That is, the barrier appears to have had its intended impact at preventing suicide despite a short-term rise in deaths at other bridges.

Suicide prevention advocates argue that it is the transportation officials’ responsibility to ensure that commuters using their highways, bridges, tunnels, or overpasses are protected from safety hazards. They further argue that if individuals are killing themselves using structures for which these transportation officials are responsible, then the officials need to consider ways to address the problem. This bill brings together stakeholders to attempt to find ways to address the problem in San Diego.

*Related legislation:* AB 74 (Ting), Chapter 23, Statutes of 2019, the 2019-20 Budget Act, appropriated \$5 million from the General Fund to advance suicide prevention measures on the San Diego-Coronado Bridge.

*Previous legislation:* AB 755 (Ammiano), Chapter 593, Statutes of 2013, requires project initiation documents related to any new project involving the construction of a new bridge or the replacement of a bridge with a history of documented suicides to document that a suicide barrier was considered during the project's planning process.

## **REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:**

### **Support**

County of San Diego

### **Opposition**

None on file

**Analysis Prepared by:** Eric Thronson / TRANS. / (916) 319-2093