

CONSULTANTS: RIVERWALK ONLY NEEDS MINOR REPAIRS\ - \$4 MILLION PRICE TAG HAS DROPPED TO ABOUT \$60,000

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The Savannah Riverwalk can be brought up to design standards by adding 160 feet of rip rap along one section, a far less extensive fix than the \$4 million in stabilization repairs that private consultants estimated in March.

City Council members got the updated analysis Thursday morning at a workshop meeting. Most seemed accepting of the detailed explanation provided by consultant Robert Bachus, a principal with Geosyntec of Kennesaw.

Alderman Tony Thomas offered some skepticism. "I think it's amazing that this thing has kind of fixed itself," he said. "You went from needing \$4 million to just putting down some rock."

Mayor Otis Johnson and Alderman Larry Stuber, a retired engineering CEO who called for the review, defended the results, saying it provided the public reassurance that was needed.

Geosyntec is putting its business reputation on the line by standing by this new analysis, the

mayor said.

Cost for the additional soil and structural analysis is estimated at \$180,000, which the city apparently will pay. Executives with Thomas & Hutton, the engineering firm that built the riverwalk, said they had not been asked to pay it. Thomas & Hutton will pay for the rip-rap installation, which is expected to cost about \$60,000, and for a separate \$50,000 estimated repair to a bowed wall that was not part of additional analysis. Sam McCachern, senior vice president for Thomas & Hutton, told council it was the firm's opinion the bowed wall was better left as is, but City Manager Rochelle Small-Toney told council that was unacceptable.

"I won't accept this project unless it is taken care of," she said.

ADDITIONAL DATA

Council last May was advised of structural problems along the 2,100-foot walkway, which extends east along the Savannah River from the Savannah Riverfront Marriott. Thomas & Hutton's insurance covered the cost of the \$3.8 million repair to a 448-foot section of the wall.

Thomas & Hutton says inaccurate soil analysis that a subcontractor provided led to stability problems. An old wooden wharf removed along the 448-foot section also destabilized the riverbed.

The engineering consultants council hired did an initial review of the riverwalk and design data, but were not allowed to talk to Thomas & Hutton engineers until after they presented initial findings. Once they did, Bachus said, they realized Thomas & Hutton had installed an anchoring system that was nearly twice as strong as the consultants calculated.

That provided a higher level of support.

The consultants then did a much more sophisticated seismic analysis of the project. The more sophisticated analysis, which is used routinely along the West Coast, provided a more accurate analysis than East Coast methods, Bachus said. He compared it to the difference between a patient getting an X-ray or an MRI. Both can be used for diagnosis, but the MRI is much more detailed.

That higher analysis, combined with the stronger anchoring system, changed the calculations for how much of a load the riverwalk could handle from the fill dirt on the land side and how

much stress it could handle from the force of the river's changing tides.

PRIVATE MEETINGS

Thomas also questioned McCachern about private, one-on-one meetings he had with some members of council. McCachern said in the last month he met with Mayor Pro Tem Edna Jackson, Alderwoman Mary Osborne and Alderman Clifton Jones.

"It had been suggested we needed to try to repair those relationships," McCachern said.

He did not say who made that suggestion. Thomas, Stuber and Alderman Jeff Felser, who have been among the most vocal about the repairs, say they were not offered individual briefings. McCachern said outside the meeting he also had met with Alderwoman Mary Ellen Sprague.

Though Open Meetings law does allow a council member to meet privately on an issue, City Council members have been warned by state Attorney General Sam Olens that they should avoid even the appearance of circumventing Open Meetings law. One-on-one meetings were an example he cited when he met with council in May. That meeting was prompted after Olens' office found three violations of Open Meetings law during the city manager search.

PUBLIC ACCESS

Neither McCachern nor city officials could provide an estimate about when riverwalk repairs would be finished.

Once they are, though, the city isn't planning to allow public access by land, Small-Toney said.

The area is too isolated, which creates a public safety risk if someone were to fall into the water. The long-range plan calls for that section of riverwalk to connect with the old riverwalk, but the connecting portion has not been built. Access from the road is by private property only.

She has asked city staff to come up with solutions to provide access, but it may not come until private development happens on the site.

It was not welcome news for some members of council, including Thomas, Felser and Stuber.

"We can't have a \$10 million facility sitting there for 10 years and it not be used," Stuber said.

Agreed Felser: "We don't want a riverwalk to nowhere."

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