AQUATIC PARK: WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

BY KATHERINE HIJAR



Aquatic Park aerial view, San Francisco, Calif., possibly 1940-1949. P93-065, Series 1, File Unit 11, Item A11.28254 (SAFR 21374).

Imagine the breathtaking view from Aquatic Park: blue-green water shimmering in the brisk wind, the green hills of Marin County in the distance. Hardy swimmers confidently navigate the cove and the Bay beyond. Since we're imagining, let's agree that it's a crystal-clear, sunny day—all blue skies. Behind you, the clean-lined, curving design of the glorious Art Deco bathhouse, now known as the Sala Burton Maritime Museum Building, inspires admiration.

Even on a cold, windy, foggy day, this is a scenic spot.

Tiburon Bridge Plans Given City; Would Run Over Aquatic Park

BY DICK NOLAN

Preliminary plans for the proposed Tiburon-Angel Island-San Francisco Bay crossing were submitted yesterday to the city by Norman Raab, chief engineer for the Toll Bridge Authority.

The sketches, as city officials had feared, showed the bridge crossing directly over Aquatic Park — and its approach system looping concrete tentacles over the western slope of Russian Hill.

Works Director Sherman P. Duckel said that the city has no intention of accepting the plans as now drawn.

NEW PLAN DUE.

He ordered copies prepared for the police traffic bureau and the city planning department.

The police, planners and works department engineers will attempt to work out an improved approach system. This may involve changes in the city's master plan of freeways.

The new bridge, as drawn in the preliminary plans, is a two-level structure carried high across the Bay on a system of piers and suspension towers.

The upper level, according to Raab, would be placed into service first as a six lane bridge for vehicular traffic, three lanes for each direction.

The lower level would be designed to carry a future rapid transit line. If for any reason rapid transit does not develop, it would be available as a second six-lane vehicular route.

The bridge would take off from the western slope of Tiburon Peninsula, cross Raccoon Strait with 185 feet of clearance, traverse the surface of Angel Island, then make the long over-water crossing to Aquatic Park.

The bridge just off Aquatic Park would be 210 feet over the Bay.

On the San Francisco side the approach system would be tied in with an extended Embarcadero Freeway, a Golden Gate Freeway, and the proposed Central Freeway, which is planned to parallel Van Ness Avenue between Polk and Larkin Streets.

The bridge would run directly into the Central Freeway, and would actually form an extension of it.

The preliminary sketches show on-off ramps at Polk and Broadway and Larkin on Broadway, and at Polk and Lombard and Larkin and Lombard.

FREEWAY LINK.

Sweeping curves linking the bridge approaches to the Golden Gate Freeway would be placed in the area bounded by Gough, Union, Larkin and Lombard Streets.

In commenting on the sketches, Raab said that the Aquatic Park route looked like the only one possible, in view of the city's master plan of freeways.

Raab said his department was working with a small appropriation of $50,000, which would not be enough to provide detailed engineering studies.

A report will be given the Legislature late this year, he added. It will consist of a final "preliminary" sketch—a refinement of the one given the city—and a request for more planning money.

While not indorsing the approach system as now drawn, Duckel said he thought the proposed Tiburon crossing was a desirable one.

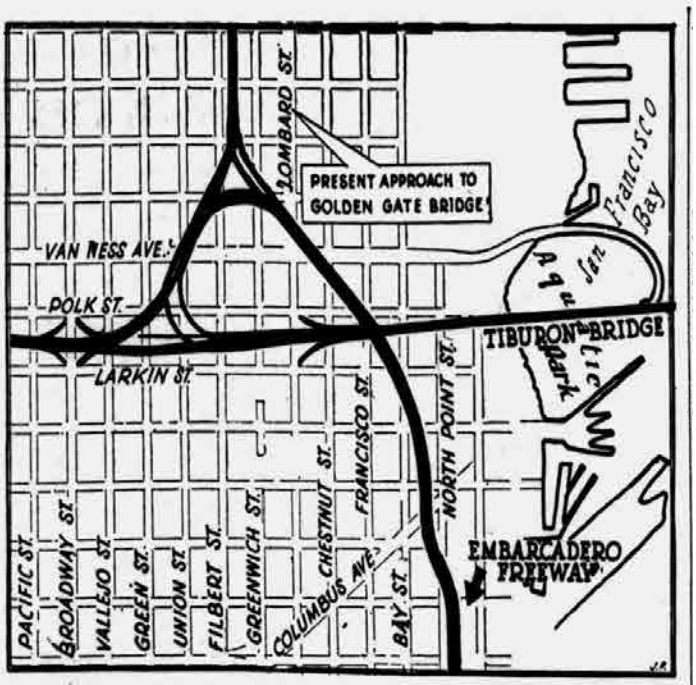
ANTICIPATES PROTESTS.

Duckel declared construction of the bridge might eliminate the need for any freeway construction west of Van Ness Avenue, since a heavy traffic load would be diverted from the Golden Gate Bridge.

He said he anticipated that release of the sketch plans would probably produce another "freeway furore" when property owners in the Russian Hill sector saw them.

But he, like Raab, emphasized that the sketches as now drawn do not necessarily represent the final engineering answers.

One possibility that will probably be discussed is that of shifting the bridgehead to the Fort Mason vicinity. Others will be developed as the city departments study the problem.



'RAFTER' PLAN — This diagram, based on State drawings, shows how present Tiburon Bridge plans would send a six-lane "rafter" arching over Aquatic Park. The approach would tie in to the Embarcadero Freeway and the central link (paralleling Larkin Street) and the proposed new Gate Bridge approach, south of Lombard Street.

Boone Monument

WASHINGTON, April 3.—(AP) — President Eisenhower has signed a bill setting aside land at Boonesboro, Kentucky, for creation of a monument to Daniel Boone and other pioneers.

$50 Garage Holdup

A nattily dressed robber held up Lonnie Tatum, the attendant of the Olympic Garage, 665 Sutter Street, early yesterday and escaped with about $50 from the cash register.

Jordan-Syria Visit

DAMASCUS (Syria), April 3. (AP)—Jordan's King Hussein will pay a three-day state visit to Syria soon, a high government official said today. He was invited by Syrian President Shukri Kuwatly.

San Francisco Examiner, April 4, 1956

"THE GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE AUTHORITY PROPOSED **ANGEL ISLAND BRIDGE.**"

Now let's imagine something else, something awful: Aquatic Park and the Art Deco bathhouse sit forlorn in the dark shade of a looming structure 160 feet overhead.[1] Looking up, one sees the underside of a bridge that extends from Russian Hill to Angel Island to Tiburon. The water is still blue-green, the sky is still bright blue, Marin County is still visible if you're standing in the right spot. Swimmers can still navigate through the shaded waters, perhaps, but this place is no longer inspirational.

Such a bridge was, for a short time in the late 1950s, considered by state and regional officials as a remedy to increasing traffic flow on the Golden Gate Bridge. The State of California, noting the annual rise of automobile traffic, charged the State Division of San Francisco Bay Toll Crossings with initiating a study and coming up with a plan for a second SF-Marin bridge.

In the postwar era of the 1940s, as automobile ownership steadily increased, San Francisco initiated a number of major freeway projects designed to keep auto traffic moving. These included the building of the Broadway Tunnel and numerous new freeways that cut through the city.

As early as 1948, the Golden Gate Bridge Authority proposed an "Angel Island Bridge" that would start at the foot of Van Ness Avenue and extend to Marin County.[2] By 1955, the State legislature had charged the California Toll Bridge Authority with investigating the feasibility and costs of such a plan.[3]

1 "S. F. Will Protest Tiburon Bridge." *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 7, 1956, p. 6.

2 "Angel Island Bridge Bid: Golden Gate District Votes to Apply for Land as Spanned Anchor." *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 11, 1948, p. 1; "The Angel Island Bridge Scheme," January 1, 1949, p. 10.

3 Division of San Francisco Bay Toll Crossings, Department of Public Works, State of California. "A Progress Report to Department of Public Works on a San Francisco-Marin Crossing of San Francisco Bay," February 1962, p. I-2.

> “ON-RAMPS TO THE BRIDGE WOULD PUT SPAGHETTI ALL OVER RUSSIAN HILL.”

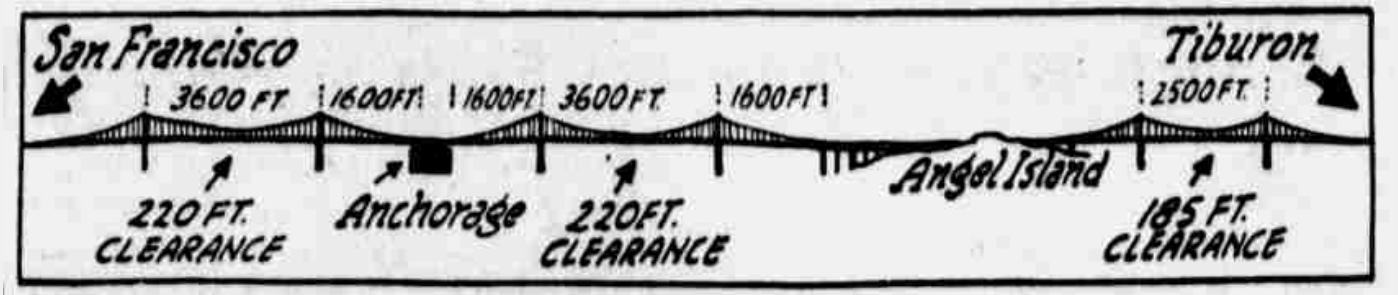
There was no doubt that bridge traffic was increasing. In 1950, more than 26,000 vehicles, on average, crossed the Golden Gate Bridge. [In spite of the dramatic population density of San Francisco and Marin County since 1950, recent statistics demonstrate both the success of increased public transit and the long workstyle effects of Covid.] In the fiscal year 2022-2023, an average of 44,784 vehicles crossed the bridge daily.[4]

Early in 1956, the conversation in San Francisco had become heated. Mayor George Christopher and other city officials pledged their opposition to a Tiburon bridge and sent a formal, signed protest to the Authority.[5] The Board of Supervisors was likewise opposed.

A *San Francisco Examiner* reporter noted that sketches of the proposed bay crossing showed its San Francisco approach “looping concrete tentacles” over the hill’s western side.[6] San Francisco’s Planning Director, Paul G. Oppermann, backed the collective protest with another evocative metaphor, noting that the on-ramps to the bridge would “put spaghetti all over Russian Hill.”[7] Unsurprisingly, Russian Hill property owners and residents were particularly concerned about the proposal.

The impact that the project would have on Aquatic Park and the Maritime Museum was clear. The General Manager of the S.F. Recreation and Park Department recognized this, as did other city residents. A letter to the *San Francisco Examiner* noted that the project would destroy “our only beach in San Francisco where we can swim safely.”[8] David Nelson, Executive Director of the San Francisco Maritime Museum and founding President of the San Francisco Maritime Association, argued that if the project were

San Francisco Examiner, January 31, 1956



SPAN PLAN — Sketch shows multiple span construction of proposed high level bridge from San Francisco to Marin County. The distances from water line to span show clearances for ships figured at 185 to 220 feet. Horizontal clearance distances, as estimated by State, also are given.

4 “Traffic Growth is Compelling a Second S.F.-Marin Bridge.” *San Francisco Examiner*, March 1, 1962, p. 30; Golden Gate Bridge, Highway, and Transportation District. Annual Comprehensive Financial Report for the Fiscal Years Ended June 2023 and June 30, 2022, pp. 112-113. The average numbers are based on one-way, southbound traffic.

5 “S. F. Will Protest Tiburon Bridge.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 7, 1956, p. 6.

6 Dick Nolan, “Tiburon Bridge Plans Given City; Would Run Over Aquatic Park.” *San Francisco Examiner,* April 4, 1956, p. 3.

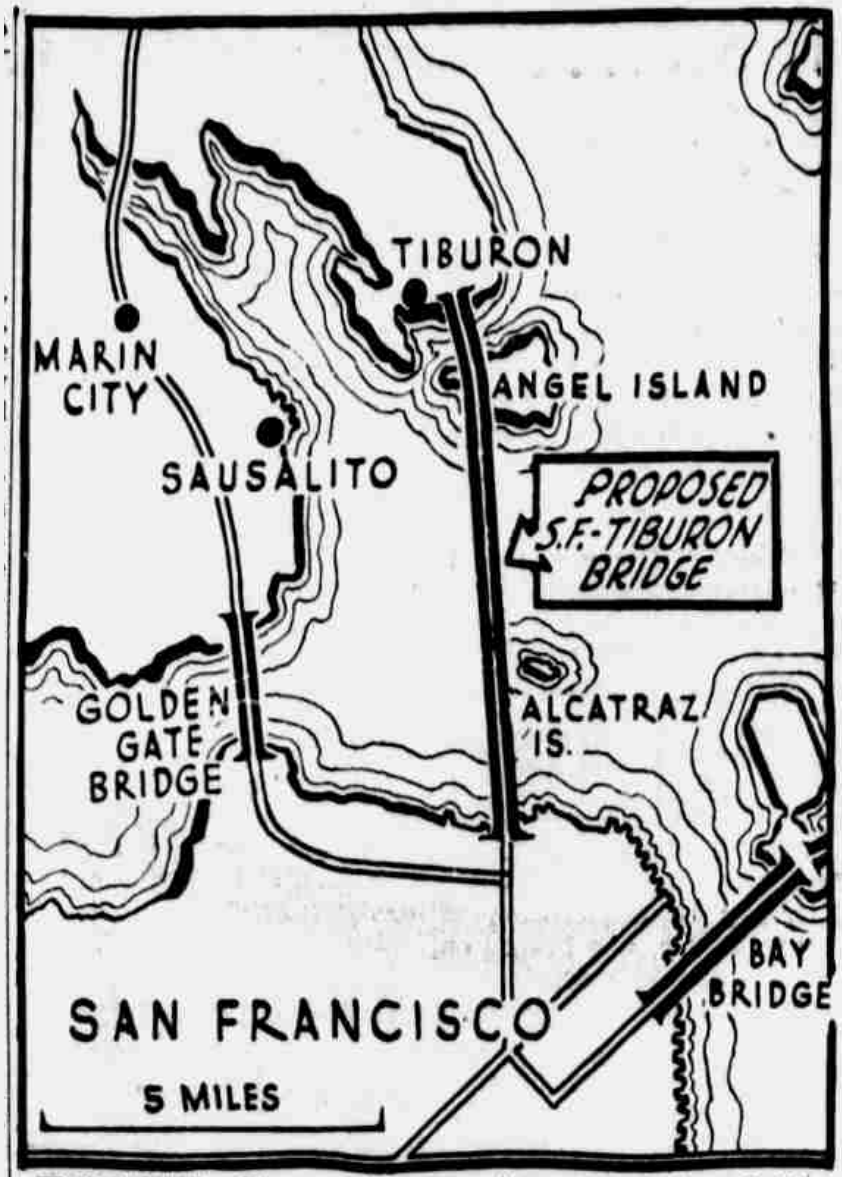
7 Richard Reinhardt, “Christopher’s ‘Little Team’ Discusses Variety of Topics.” *San Francisco Chronicle,* February 10, 1956, p. 4.

8 Ibid.; “The Editor’s Mail Box.” *San Francisco Examiner*, April 11, 1956, p. 32.

undertaken, it would jeopardize the very existence of the Museum and its collections. At the time, the future of San Francisco Maritime was dependent upon the State Park Commission stepping in to take over. A bridge to Tiburon "might cause the State Park Commission to withdraw its interest in the plans for a big park and museum in the area."[9]

The State legislature clung to its vision of a San Francisco-Tiburon bridge at least until 1965, offering new suggestions for an alternative approach that included Fort Mason and a tunnel underneath Telegraph Hill. Perhaps the most creative proposal, never considered seriously, was an underwater tube that would extend from the Embarcadero Freeway at the foot of Broadway, rising about 1500 yards out into the bay at Blossom Rock to meet an elevated Tiburon Bridge.[10]

The cost of such a project was ultimately deemed unfeasible. Today, improved public transit across the Golden Gate Bridge and bike-riding commuters and day trippers have helped ameliorate traffic congestion. While some might grumble about the current state of affairs in crossing the Bay, the beauty and enjoyment that have been preserved by the failure of the Tiburon Bridge plan are undeniable.



ROUTE—Proposed route for contemplated high level bridge from San Francisco to Marin County is sketched. Route, disclosed yesterday by the State, would start near the foot of Van Ness Avenue, include a road strip across Angel Island, and extend to Point Tiburon.

San Francisco Examiner, April 4, 1956

9 Joseph Bodovitz, "S. F. Warned: Get Busy on Freeways." *San Francisco Examiner*, October 3, 1958, p. 13.

10 Division of San Francisco Bay Toll Crossings, Department of Public Works, State of California. "A Progress Report to Department of Public Works on a San Francisco-Marin Crossing of San Francisco Bay," February 1962, pp. IV-1, IV-2; William Thomas, "Tubes, Tunnels: Dobbs' Plan to Solve S. F. Freeway Snarl." *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 8, 1963, pp. 1, 20; "Bridge Opposed: Planners Prefer a Tube to Marin." *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 18, 1965, p. 4.