

Bridge Need Probed

The Douglas and Jefferson County Commissions Friday afternoon combined into a joint board, electing Harvey Booth as chairman, to explore all possibilities in replacing the condemned Lecompton Bridge with another span across the Kansas river.

The two governing bodies, in an almost two-hour meeting at the Douglas County Courthouse, heard citizens from Perry, Lecompton and Lawrence express their backing for another bridge at the same site as the condemned structure, about 11 miles northwest of Lawrence.

The Lecompton Bridge, battered last on Dec. 17 by a hit-and-run motorist, was closed Wednesday by the Douglas County Commission after the three-man board studied reports from County Engineer Lawrence Rice and Walter Johnson, the state highway engineer. The reports showed the bridge unsafe for traffic, which Friday morning the commission interpreted to mean pedestrians, also.

Booth, who chaired discussion Friday from the 13 persons present, not counting the press and county officials, said the purpose of the meeting was "to get some of the thinking of where do we go from here?"

After all discussion had ended, the joint boards generally agreed that a new bridge was needed across the Kansas River now that the Lecompton Bridge was closed. But the largest unanswered question facing the combined body was, "where to put it."

"The question is—there should be a bridge, but where should it be and how are we going to get it over in an election?" Commissioner Travis Glass said. "But I do feel we need to go to Topeka before we decide what our next step is."

Glass, Booth and Walter Kampschroeder all agreed that future plans of the State Highway Commission should be thoroughly explored with a unified effort by representatives affected by the condemned Le-

compton span.

"We're in a different predicament because we were turned down by a vote of the people at the last election," Kampschroeder said, referring to the Douglas County defeat last Aug. 2 of a question of whether a new bridge should be built at Lecompton. The proposal failed by only 246 votes out of 8,252 cast, or 3 per cent of the total vote. "I think before we could take any action to build a bridge, we'd have to have another election."

Glass agreed and suggested that perhaps a location closer to Lawrence could also benefit both communities. He said there would have to be better efforts made to insure passage of the question on the ballot.

"There isn't any question a bridge is a necessary thing," Booth said. "I think we ought to explore every possible angle of what could be done by the State Highway Department on what can be done for highways and bridges in our areas."

Booth suggested all units of

government get together for a unified effort for a future meeting with John Montgomery, State Highway director, or, if necessary, Gov. Robert Docking.

Citizens favoring a bridge at Lecompton then spoke up. No one voiced opposition to the proposal. Representatives of the Perry Reservoir Assn., farmers who farm on both sides of the Kansas River near the Lecompton crossing, workers from the DuPont Cellophane Co., the superintendent of Perry's schools, the mayor of Perry and a Lawrence businessman all spoke in favor of a new bridge there.

All generally acknowledged the need for a second crossing at Lawrence, but they said a bridge at Lecompton was equally justified. They said a new bridge at Lecompton would enable the Perry-Lecompton community, which they said has become interwoven, to develop

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further. Spokesmen said Clinch and Perry reservoirs will require a bridge there to solve a pressing and constant need that will grow in the future. Others cited the problem of farming on both sides of the river, or driving 54 miles by highway to get from Perry to work at DuPont.

Mason Brunton, superintendent of Perry schools, said the condemned bridge has already caused a problem for some of his teachers. In addition, he said he could unify his smaller schools, eliminating teachers and salaries, if there were a bridge at Lecompton.

Rice, answering a question, said the cost of the bridge proposed last August was about \$1,353,191. Today, he said, costs could run between 10 and 15 per cent higher because of a rise in steel and construction costs.

County Attorney Dan Young, mentioned to Brunton that he thought the county commission would not be willing to take the risk of letting teachers walk across the bridge. Young also told the two bodies that he believed a new bridge would have to be put to a vote in Douglas County. "Otherwise, any time you wanted to build a new bridge, all you'd have to do is condemn," he said. Young also said the previous vote on the question was a factor.

Booth pointed out three factors which would affect community reaction to a new bridge. None was present when the issue failed last August, he pointed out, and added that he was not saying they were good or bad factors.

"There was a bridge in tall and there is none now," he said. "Two, the ratio of each county's valuation has changed — Douglas County's has gone up, and Jefferson County's has gone down. And three, Douglas County has authorized a building program study."

Bert Seyler of Perry said there was too much emphasis last August on the 80-20 ratio set up between the two counties to pay for the proposed bridge. Seyler said county valuation was the fairest way to share the bridge's costs because the cost per individual citizen was the same. He said the 80-20 split, of which Douglas County was to have paid 80, did not mean that Douglas residents paid four times what Jefferson County residents paid.

The two commissions did not discuss particulars of how a new span would be paid for by the two counties.

The Douglas County commissioners clarified the present 2-mill special bridge fund levy that was incorporated into last July's county budget. They in-

cluded that it could have been used to pay for the Lecompton Bridge had it been passed by county voters last August. They clearly spelled out Friday, however, that the 2 mills was not then and is not now marked for any specific bridge and that it can be used for any county bridge improvements.

"I would not be interested in any action or making any decision until we pursue that last effort with the State Highway Department," Glass said. "We have taken steps already to get results on the traffic study so it cannot be used as an excuse by the state Highway Department for not committing themselves. I don't want to take any action until we pursue this one more time."

Glass referred to a traffic study project of the city of Lawrence, which is expected to analyze traffic conditions in the Lawrence area, including bridge needs. In the past, discussions on bridges or highways in this area by local officials to state officials always have stalled when state officials indicate they want to wait and see results of the traffic study of the city. The study is being done by the state highway engineer's office and has been delayed for some time.

"I don't think anyone could say there is enough local traffic between Perry and Lecompton to justify a \$1.25 million bridge," Booth said. "That is why I think any river crossing should be a state project and why we ought to explore all possibilities with the State Highway Department."

The meeting ended with Booth being elected as chairman and agreement that future meetings of the joint commissions would be upcoming. No date was set for the group's next session.