

# Build our bridge

BY GENE PFEIFER

SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

A bridge to the 21st century? The William J. Clinton Foundation won't even build its bridge to North Little Rock.

In 1997, the Clinton Foundation, in return for Little Rock's gift of free land, promised not only the library, magnificently delivered, but also renovation of the Rock Island Railroad Bridge to a bicycle/pedestrian link in our trail system, woefully not delivered.

As an additional inducement, the Little Rock Board of Directors promised \$1 million toward the cost of the bridge, and members evidenced their conviction that they had a deal by borrowing the money and placing it in escrow, where it remains today. City Directors John Adcock, Brad Cazort, Michael Keck, Dean Kumpuris and B.J. Wyrick, holdovers from that earlier board, should at least confirm the unfulfilled promise and at most persuade the newer members to join them in demanding that the Clinton Foundation meet its 10-year-old commitment.

While Skip Rutherford spoke for the foundation, he reconfirmed the pledge in public pronouncements, and once, in December 2005, claimed the money was in place and construction would begin in 2006. While campaigning vigorously, one would think that the Clintons would want to prevent the potential for bad publicity, unavoidable with further delays.

The rusting bridge and weed-infested gate, a mere 300 feet from the entrance to the otherwise beautiful presidential library, provide cartoonists, pundits and activists with a wealth of visual bridge metaphors best prevented.

The foundation's Web site and recent articles on the Clintons' wealth render disingenuous any claims that the cost of

## Guest writer

bridge renovation is unattainable.

Funds were solicited for brick pavers for the bridge. Those public-spirited citizens who thought they were making a real contribution to construction of the bridge are doubtless feeling cheated.

The Big Dam Bridge connects the two riverside trails at the west end, but an incomplete Clinton Bridge fails to close the promised 14-mile loop, thereby becoming the most high-profile gap in our nationally recognized trail.

Sen. Hillary Clinton, while first lady and representing the White House Millennium Council, in 2000 designated our river trail as a Millennium Trail "to bring the community together." Other Millennium Trails may not have included anything as grandiose as the Clinton Bridge, but there was never any doubt that our Millennium Trail contained just exactly this project.

Asking first "only" for free land, the foundation later stipulated city maintenance of the grounds and avoidance of sales tax on the building materials on the dubious assumption the library was a "headquarters." (Isn't Bill's headquarters in Harlem?) Savings in taxes and maintenance would pay for the bridge.

Damage control is not an energizing, pleasant or politically viable reason to undertake a project. Turn negatives to positives. The Clinton Bridge offers the senator a superb presidential campaign plank, and it offers another remarkable addition to the former president's Little

Rock complex. For both of them, transforming this rusting hulk into truly a bridge to the 21st century offers the following compelling rationale:

- Replacing cars with foot and bicycle traffic, this bridge will promote alternative transportation, reducing reliance on fossil fuels.

- Promoting healthy lifestyles, including exercise, this bridge will reduce obesity, particularly in children.

- Pedestrian and bicycle traffic promotes clean air.

- Pedestrians and cyclists support compact, walkable and bikeable communities that rely less on freeways and parking lots that use resources in ways that spoil the environment.

Our Medical Mile portion of the river trail delivers a health and fitness message with trailside displays. This bridge could

become a linear museum promoting the favorite causes of the Clintons. Like the library itself, the Bridge to the 21st Century could gain universal financial support because its messages could be those with universal appeal.

The rusting bridge and the unfulfilled promise shout aloud the current message

that the community should placidly accept an unspecified deferred schedule. I ask that the Clinton Foundation disclaim this message immediately and reconfirm the commitment, set a deadline for commencement of construction and build our bridge.



Gene Pfeifer, a trail enthusiast who donated more than a mile of shoreline for the Arkansas River Trail, lives in Little Rock.