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County Gives its Bridges Away to Save Them.

Editor's Note: Story revised to clarify the nature of the project as being separate from Pennsylvania's statewide Rapid Bridge Replacement Project (revision posted March 25, 2016 at 11:30 a.m.).

A Pennsylvania county is temporarily relinquishing ownership of 33 bridges to save them from further deterioration.

The Northampton County Council voted in early March to transfer ownership of the bridges to the county's independent General Purpose Authority so that the spans could be replaced or repaired through a public-private partnership.

Pennsylvania's Public-Private Partnership Board's approval of the project in November 2015 paved the way for the P3, which would replace 28 county-owned bridges and repair six others. Pennsylvania's Department of Transportation will serve in an advisory capacity throughout the procurement.

The ownership transfer is necessary because, although bridges owned by independent authorities qualify for this type of procurement to complete their replacement or repair, county-owned ones do not. Once the construction has been completed, bridge ownership will revert to the county, reported the Allentown Morning Call on March 3.

This project is modeled after the Commonwealth's Rapid Bridge Replacement project, but will be a separate P3 procurement.

Northampton borrowed \$11.4 million through a bond issue in 2013 to repair or replace 19 bridges but decided that it could not afford an additional \$1 million to hire professionals to oversee the construction, according to a Feb. 18 Allentown Morning Call article. The county had applied to have the bridges repaired through the state's ongoing transportation improvement program, which would cover some of the cost, but only one bridge had been selected for the program over the last 20 years. The average county bridge is 61 years old, said Northampton County Executive John Brown.

Brown believes using a P3 could lower the cost of bridge repairs by 30 percent to about \$40 million and that the county could pay up to \$6 million per year to finance it.

"Public-private partnerships are one way that we can leverage private-sector ideas and resources to improve transportation in our state," said Pennsylvania Department of Transportation Secretary and P3 Board Chair Leslie S. Richards. "Whether started by the department or suggested by the private sector, we have many options to deliver improved or new services."

NCPPP

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