

Times of San Diego October 4, 2023

Stopping the Coronado Bridge Suicide Machine

By George Mullen, Bill Walton & Jack McGrory



The San Diego-Coronado Bridge has seen over 450 suicides over the years. Photo by Chris Stone

In April 2018, [A Simple Solution to Preventing Suicides on the Coronado Bridge](#) was published in the Times of San Diego.

This proposed solution drew significant attention, but was not enacted.

Five years later, the Coronado Bridge Suicide Machine continues unabated. As do the interminable bridge shutdowns causing massive traffic problems on both sides of the bridge and on Interstate 5.

Our beautiful Coronado Bridge shockingly remains the number two suicide magnet in America.

It is estimated that more than 450 people have jumped to their deaths since the bridge opened in 1969, with an annual average of 15 in recent years. In total, the Coronado Bridge averages 35 traffic shutdowns each year based on suicide attempts.

One [recent bridge shutdown](#) began during Friday afternoon traffic hour and remained closed in both directions for over eight hours – describing it as "traffic armageddon" would be putting it mildly.

The only recent attempt to prevent this ongoing humanitarian tragedy was the addition of four-inch bird spikes along the bridge's top railings. Most saw bird spikes as an iffy idea that would never work. Nevertheless, after studying the concept, Caltrans went forward in March 2019 and [installed them at a cost of \\$420,000 to taxpayers](#).

The bird spikes were immediately proven ineffective. Within weeks of the project's completion, three people committed suicide by jumping. A total of 18 jumped to their deaths in 2019, all but three were after the spikes were installed.

The Golden Gate Bridge – America's number one suicide magnet – is currently in the process of installing nets to dissuade jumpers at a [cost of \\$400 million, five times the original estimate](#).

The savior-on-the-horizon talk of a [vertical steel net at a cost of \\$140 million](#) for the Coronado Bridge continues. But an installation date never seems to arrive; it is now delayed until at least 2029. If the Golden Gate example holds true, we can expect our local estimate to rise fivefold as well.

Where will this money come from? Will this actually stop the suicides? Will a steel net ruin the clean panoramic lines of our bridge? Is the cost-benefit analysis worth it? Will it ever happen? We are doubtful.

Is there a better option?

Yes, there is.

It is the same common-sense solution proposed in 2018 which can be implemented within a month's time and for less than \$45,000.

As a [barbwire artist](#), George has firsthand experience knowing barbwire to be vicious, violent, intimidating, and unforgiving. And yet, it is highly effective.

No one wants to tangle with barbwire, and this is precisely the point.

Our Coronado Bridge, on the other hand, is the ultimate suicide convenience stop for desperate souls – hit brakes, open door, step over a 34-inch mini-wall, get small scratch from bird spikes, jump.

Should an impromptu life-exit for troubled individuals remain so easy?

Certainly not.

We can rectify this problem by ratcheting up the deterrent factor, and barbwire is one of the most effective deterrents ever imagined.

Suicidal thoughts are often impulsive and fleeting – without an easy impromptu life-exit handily available, many of these troubled individuals will regain control and live out productive and fruitful lives.

Specifically, we propose a taut barrier of three strands of galvanized barbwire running horizontally above the current barrier and fastened to the existing light-poles. The bird spikes should remain in place and will work well in conjunction with the barbwire to maximize the deterrent factor.

Barbwire is a proven success at stopping both people and animals from crossing defined lines.

The Coronado Bridge spans one and half miles. With two sides this equals three miles, multiplied by three strands, totals nine miles of barbwire.

With barbwire, ties, stabilizing rods, bird prevention reflectors, and miscellaneous items, material costs will be under \$8,500. Running and tying barbwire is quick – labor will be under \$16,500. The total job cost would be less than \$25,000.

For good measure, let's add another \$20,000 for any unexpected cost overruns. Let's call it \$45,000 for a serious effort to save 15 persons every single year, and eliminate 35 unnecessary lengthy traffic bridge shutdowns every year.

There is no need for expensive and time-consuming studies before implementation.

Barbwire has been around since 1867 and has been highly effective along highways for over a century. It is routinely placed adjacent to speeding cars and has successfully kept trespassers off of ranch lands, and livestock and wild animals off of dangerous highways.

It is highly durable and used all over our nation in the most extreme weather conditions: high winds, heat, cold, sleet, snow, salt air, and everything else mother nature has to throw at it. It is a well known quantity, especially along highways, which is exactly what the Coronado Bridge / California State Route 75 is.

Barbwire is light and thin, won't encroach upon vehicles in the roadway and won't be visible in the panoramic photos of the bridge and the bay.

There's no walking pedestrian risk, no structural changes to the bridge, no weight or wind resistance factors, and no heavy materials at risk of falling.

Barbwire can also be painted grey, blue, white, or a mixture of the three to blend into the background and become near invisible. Think of the paint camouflage on our U.S. Navy ships and airplanes.

Again, no expensive testing or study is required. Just do it.

Bridges with added barriers have seen [suicides decline by 79 – 91 percent](#), but this does not mean it has to be a \$400 million barrier. A simple common sense barbwire barrier will accomplish the task at hand.

Naysayers and pessimists will be quick to say that a suicidal person could just bring their own wire cutters. True, but that's generally not what desperate, impromptu suicidal persons are thinking about. And if they have to go to Home Depot first, there is a good chance that most will regain their senses and not go through with the jump.

And if on rare occasion a person actually buys wire cutters and does it, the damaged barbwire section can be re-strung and fixed within an hour and for less than \$100.

Naysayers and pessimists will also claim that jumpers will "just go someplace else" to commit suicide, so why bother with installing a barrier. But they have no facts to support this assertion. Studies have consistently proven the exact opposite. A [University of California at Berkeley study by Richard H. Seiden, Ph.D.](#) revealed that 90 percent of those who were stopped from jumping at the Golden Gate Bridge did not later die by suicide (or other violent means).

The concluding sentence of this UC Berkeley study states: "*The major hypothesis under test, that Golden Gate Bridge attempters will surely and inexorably "just go someplace else," is clearly unsupported by the data. Instead, the findings confirm previous observations that suicidal behavior is crisis-oriented and acute in nature.*"

Accordingly, the justification for prevention and intervention such as building a suicide prevention barrier is warranted and the prognosis for suicide attempters is, on balance, relatively hopeful."

The opportunity to save 90 percent of our Coronado Bridge jumpers – our sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, friends, neighbors, fellow-citizens – would be a jaw-dropping success by any measure.

Think about the daunting negative ripple effects of a suicide on that person's family, friends, and community.

Humans prefer paths of least resistance – even in suicide – this is why our bridge remains the number two suicide magnet in America. It is too damn easy.

Adding the barbwire “Life Screen” barrier will bring major league resistance that will radically alter the dynamic. Threatening to jump a barbwire barrier is a very different risk factor than threatening to jump a 34-inch mini-wall.

Those who attempt to climb the barbwire screen will find it painful, difficult and slow, allowing people in stopping cars ample time to intervene. Likewise, law enforcement will now have the upper hand and be able to quickly shutdown the situation and get traffic moving again.

And troubled souls will no longer be in a position to easily gain public attention by straddling a 34-inch mini-wall and threatening to jump. Nor will they be able to easily control the situation and hold thousands of people hostage (in their cars) for hours on end.

Word will quickly spread that the Coronado Bridge is no longer open for the suicide business.

In a cost-benefit analysis, \$45,000 for the opportunity to save 150 persons every 10 years, end the incessant bridge shutdowns, and eliminate our suicide public relations nightmare is a huge win.

We have two questions for the ever-present naysayers and pessimists to new ideas: Would you like to save 15 persons every year while also ending the recurring 35 annual bridge shutdowns and traffic meltdowns? Or is it more important for you not to see even a smidgen of barbwire during your ninety-second bridge crossing?

Let's give this temporary emergency "Life Screen" a one-year test – it can easily and cheaply be removed if proven unsuccessful.

In a civil society our number one priority must be to protect, preserve, and save the lives of our citizens.

If San Diego, Coronado, and Caltrans think the expense of a one-year barbwire barrier test is too burdensome, we will pledge \$9,000 if four like-minded citizens / groups will match us.

Let's end the unnecessary deaths, San Diego and Coronado. Let's be [Cities of Life](#).

[George Mullen](#) is a [barbwire artist](#) and principal of StudioRevolution; [Bill Walton](#) is a former NBA basketball player and Hall of Famer; [Jack McGrory](#) is CEO of La Jolla MJ Management LLC and former City Manager for the City of San Diego (1991 – 1997). All three are leaders of [Sunbreak Ranch](#). To learn more (or email them) please visit the website [Stop Coronado Bridge Suicides](#).

Link to article: <https://timesofsandiego.com/opinion/2023/10/04/an-inexpensive-barbwire-barrier-could-stop-the-coronado-bridge-suicides/>