Why save an Old Train Trestle?

One thousand and twenty-five. That's the number of MOBS (men on bicycles) that is equivalent to the weight of the type of steam locomotive that the Willow Glenn Trestle was built to support – over 100 tons. Each of its tilted sets of six trestle peers are made of solid wood, twelve inches in diameter, coated in dark black creosote to protect them from insects and rot. The trestle sports header beams that are twelve inches by twelve inches thick, of solid wood with no splices.

To be sure, this trestle was an assault on the environment, nearly 100 years ago when it was built. But in the nearly 100 years since, the scars have had time to heal and the trestle has become a part of the "new" environment. Removing it now would be yet another assault on the environment; one that will take another many years to heal, and one that can easily be avoided.

Imagine riding north, with your children or grand children, on the trail leading up to the bridge. You could tell them as you ride that this section of the trail is actually built on the old railroad right of way, and maybe mention a thing or two about how San Jose got it's start as the heart of a national thriving agri-business and only later became the tech center of Silicon Valley.

As you approach the bridge the trail veers slightly and you can actually catch a glimpse of the supporting trestle structure. Then you ride on to the bridge and you can pause for just a moment, out of the way of other hikers and riders, and tell your children that this is the very bridge that was used nearly 100 years ago and that the original trestle timbers, probably harvested from nearby Sierra forests are still here and likely will be for another 100 years, doing their job; holding up this bridge that connects that past to the future.

And for just that instant, that fleeting second on a Saturday afternoon ride, those kids will realize that things were not always the way that they are now. They will realize that there is a past that took time and effort to build, and that some of that past still lingers, and actually affects them some and has relevance – even if only as a bridge on a trail.

In that moment those kids may realize that there were people before them and that they aren't the only ones that exist here – and maybe, just maybe, the germ of a thought, that slight awakening of consciousness in their young minds – could be the start of a new historian, or city planner, or environmental engineer, or artist, or a future Mayor or President of the United States.

It would be a shame to loose that teaching moment forever. In fact not just that one moment, but all such moments on all such rides and walks that would happen, or could happen over that bridge.

We have an opportunity here to save this diamond in the rough. This gem, if you will, accidently left to us by San Jose's industrial past, and the good news is that it really won't take much effort to do it. We can save it for our kids, and grand kids, and many future generations. We have the chance to be stewards of the environment by not disturbing the site through demolition of this wonderful old structure.

We can save the environment by not wasting the precious timbers in this structure, or the energy that would be required to fabricate and transport a replacement span. Reduce, re-use and recycle – a motto for which San Jose is now famous; should we not apply that here?

We can save money because it actually would (pun intended) cost less to re-purpose this trestle than it would to replace it with an inferior quality steel bridge. Budding engineers may even come to realize, in those future Saturday afternoon rides, that the tensile strength of steel is actually lower than that of wood, and that the life expectancy of steel beams in such applications is actually shorter than wood, and that thousands of bridges such as this exist all over the world – in fact if we could probably have fun with this and find a worldly sister bridge to match up with and describe in a trail-side historical marker.

We can save time because to design a new bridge surface can be done on computer and swiftly completed. Construction of a new surface would also be faster than removing the old trestle and then installing abutments and a new span. The old timbers are sound, and can last hundreds of years in to the future, but if anyone doubts that, the timbers can be tested for viability using non-destructive ultrasound imaging and the confirming results could be available for review in a matter of days.

And lastly we can save, just to save. Just for our kids and for the future. We have one chance; to do this right. Let's save the old Willow Glenn Trestle – let's don't just ride the trail, but rather stop and read the marker signs, make it a destination outing, connect the past with the future, have some fun, learn some history. In a short time, this old trestle could be gone forever; or it can be an integral, fun, conversation-starting, tourist-attracting, conservative and fortunate part of our future. Let's do this right!