

A long way across—the journey of the Woodland Walk Bridge in Clemson Downs



In early October 2024, five days after Hurricane Helene struck, a huge tulip poplar tree gave way at the roots and fell across our Woodland Walk Bridge, smashing it beyond repair. We were devastated by the loss, which cut off a beloved place to cross the creek and meander through a conservation area that meant so much to Downs residents. Thus began a 7-month long project.

The poplar tree was removed from the bridge by a local tree service company and hauled out from the creek, where it and the remaining logs sat taunting us for months. Thanks to a donation from the Modern Woodmen of America, the sycamore tree leaning over the bridge site was cut down. All the logs were cut into sizes and a wonderful group of volunteers spent a Saturday morning carting the branches to the cul-de-sac for pick up by the city. Some of the sycamore pieces, which have beautiful bark, remain standing up in a row along the trail like little soldiers as a reminder of the journey to a new bridge.

CDPOA (Clemson Downs Property Owners Association) President Webb Smathers and Common Properties Committee Chairman Nancy Palisin started looking into possible bridge builders. Most would not touch our project. A few boat dock builders gave us hope that an aluminum bridge could be built. We started to raise money to add to a very minimal insurance payout with a goal of \$12,000, the amount estimated to cover the cost of an aluminum boat dock type bridge. We began receiving donations from our POA members and some surrounding community walkers to whom the bridge was a beloved way into the Woodland Walk. Between a modest insurance claim amount, personal donations, and a Go-Fund-Me site, we raised \$12,000.

Still looking for a builder! One of the last donations we received turned out to be from a professor at the Clemson Univ. School of Architecture. He had enclosed a note with his check that asked if we would like him to connect us with the Community Research and Design Center within the School of Architecture that was taking applications for a Catalyst Grant for under \$20,000 projects. The deadline for application was January 1, 2025. By the time we got in touch with this donor, it was New Year's weekend. The professor and Nancy wrote emails to the Director asking if it was still possible to be considered.

A week later, Nancy got a call out of the blue from Dan Harding, the professor in charge of grant applications. He felt our bridge project came at the perfect time for his spring semester class, "Design-Build Studio." That is how we came to collaborate with Dan and his students to build the new Woodland Walk Bridge.



From January 10, 2025, until the bridge opening on April 25, a combined group of members from the CPC Committee and the POA Board met monthly with Dan and the Design-Build students. The work began at the Build Environment Lab studio site, where we saw the remaining sad pieces of our old bridge deconstructed. The first meeting started with a presentation of students' scale models of their creative designs. Each meeting, the designs were narrowed down until a final design was reached. Then the actual assembly of the prefabricated



Corten steel parts began in the studio lab. Corten steel, aka weathered steel, eliminates the need for painting because it develops a rusted protective coating as it is exposed to outdoor elements. The students even incorporated our POA logo into the winged steel side pieces. Every meeting, some CPC and Board attendees brought treats for the students, which made for a very happy social ending to each meeting. Those students loved their treats, especially the brownies.



There were a number of hiccups along the way. Two of the biggest: tariffs caused a fluctuating increase in the Corten steel price, and extensive surveying indicated problems with the footbridge not meeting height requirements to be above Base Flood Elevation (BFE). Luckily extra donations helped with the cost of steel and the flooring. To be within BFE regulation, the bridge had to be elevated 18". This meant adding steps, building extra cement pads, and finding extra flooring material. Thanks to Dan's expertise and contacts, it all worked out eventually, although not without some stress!



The completed bridge was taken to the Woodland Walk site in 2 sections. With half the team on each side, the sections were carried (with much physical effort) onto the erected scaffolding. Joining the sections perfectly was also not an easy accomplishment. At the end of a very long, exhausting day, the scaffolding



was disassembled and Voila! There stood a bridge.

Because of the addition of the steps, the bridge completion was under a time crunch. The dedication of the architecture students shone through again as they put in a lot of extra hours on non-class days to finish the steps and handrails to meet the scheduled April 25th ribbon cutting. As Downs residents walk over this wonderful bridge to be able to leisurely enjoy the Woodland Walk again, please think of Professor Dan Harding and these outstanding architecture students. Without their energy and dedication and their communication and collaboration with professional engineers, surveyors, and city employees, we would not be able to enjoy the Woodland Walk conservancy site. Thank you!

