

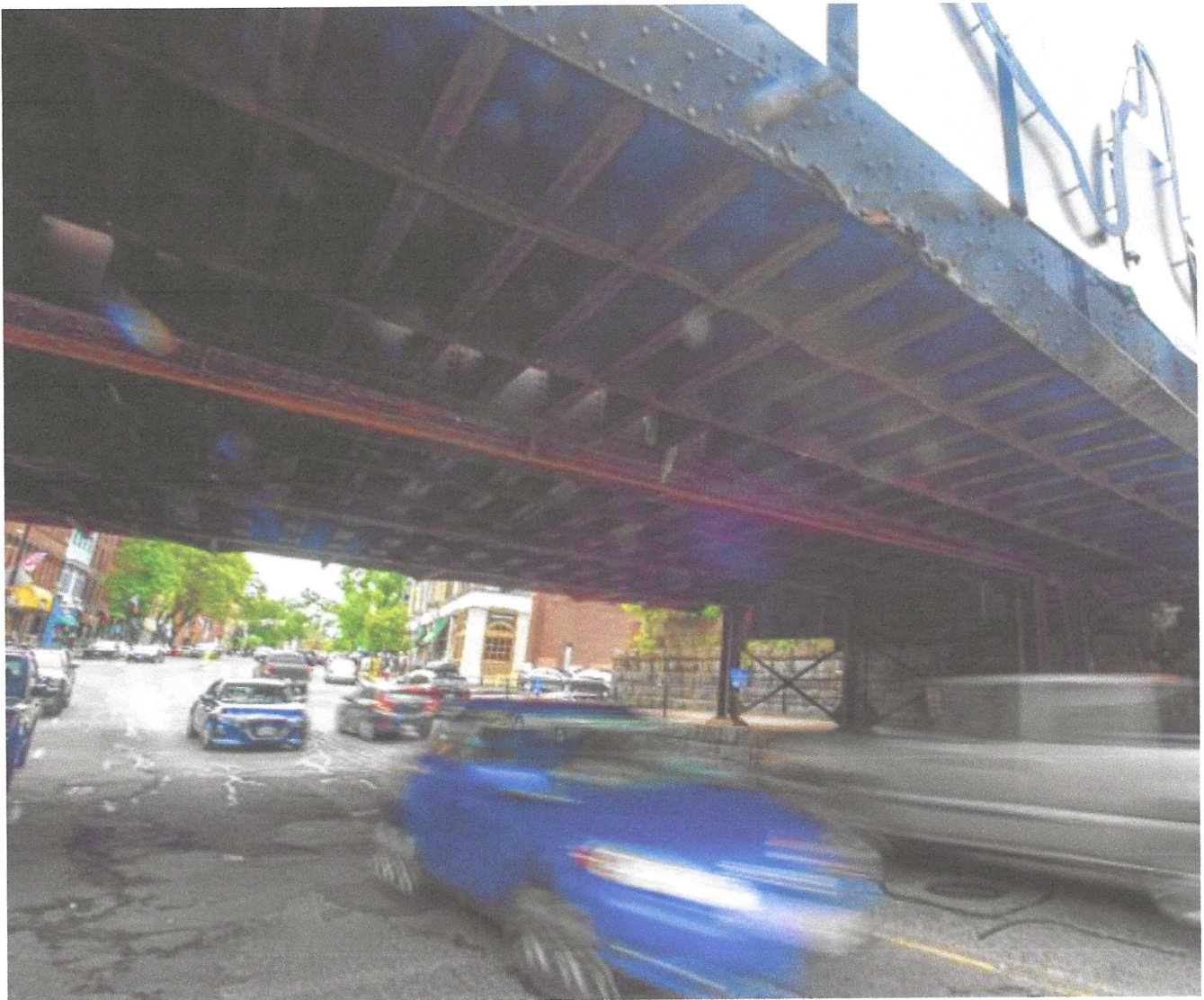
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Despite city's best efforts, low bridge still taking hits



Cars and trucks make their way under the railroad bridge on Main Street in Northampton on Monday, June 17. The bridge shows damage where it has been hit by trucks that are too tall to pass under it. STAFF PHOTO/CA



By BERA DUNAU (/byline?byline=By BERA DUNAU)

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NORTHAMPTON — Numerous signs warn of its approach. Some even display flashing lights. Yet tall vehicles have continued to strike the railroad bridge that crosses over Bridge Street, to the tune of 37 strikes since 2009. Over the same period, 162 vehicles have required police assistance to turn away from the bridge.

“I’m not really sure what we can do ... to convince them not to drive under it,” Mayor David Narkewicz said.

The so-called “truck-eating bridge,” claimed another victim (<https://www.gazettenet.com/Tractor-trailer-crashes-into-downtown-Northampton-overpass-26216622>) last week, when a tractor-trailer struck it on the night of June 11.

“It’s one of the biggest ongoing issues in Ward 3,” said Ward 3 City Councilor James Nash. “The truck-eating bridge is really problematic.”

He said that he and members of the Ward 3 Neighborhood Association saw the aftermath of Tuesday’s bridge hit, after emerging from Joe’s Spaghetti and Pizza.

Narkewicz noted that there is a warning system that sets off flashing lights near signs that warn of the bridge’s 11-foot clearance when vehicles of sufficient height approach, as well as the signs on and around the bridge.

The 53-foot trailers hauled by big rigs may be 13 feet, 6 inches tall or taller.

Northampton's warning system was put into place following the completion of a Pioneer Valley Planning Commission Study that was released in 2006, and includes a laser-triggered warning system that directs tractor-trailer trucks on Interstate 91.

Despite these measures, the bridge strikes and turnarounds have continued, although the number of turnarounds has dropped off significantly in the last few years. In 2017 and 2018, there were nine and three turnarounds respectively, as opposed to 18 and 27 in 2015 and 2016. Bridge strikes were two in 2015, three in 2016, three in 2017 and four in 2018.

Nash said that a major issue is that phone GPS directs trucks going to the Coca-Cola facility to take a left off Exit 19 and a right turn onto Day Avenue, which trucks of that size are prohibited from doing.

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"The power of the GPS is really strong," he said.

He said that this sometimes lead to the trucks going into the Ward 3 neighborhoods because most of the streets are closed to trucks.

He also said that there's high turnover among truck drivers.

"It's first day of class for many of them, repeatedly," he said.

He said it would "ideal" if the truckers would use GPS designed for trucks. He also said that, based on conversations with Coca-Cola, he estimates that 50,000 to 60,000 trucks go to its Northampton facility a year.

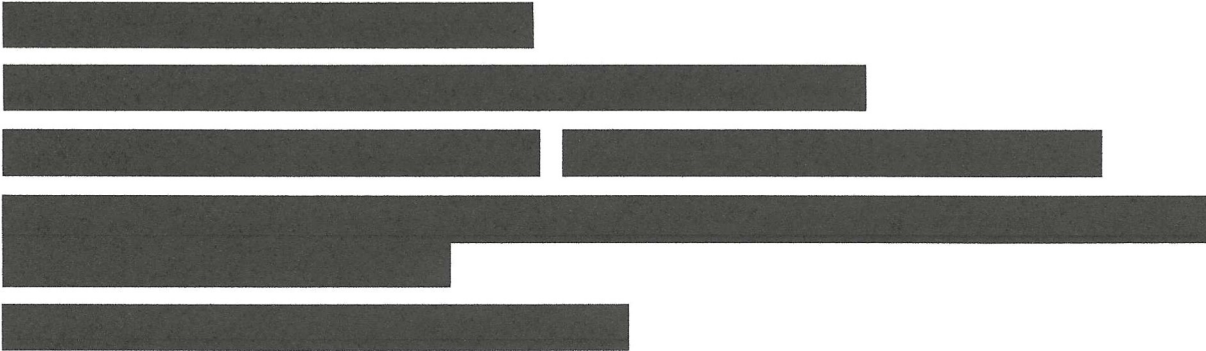
"It's like O'Hare Airport for trucks," he said.

The mayor said that he didn't know what would be involved with raising the bridge, and as for lowering the roadway, "I don't see us building a 'little dig' here."

The mayor also noted another element to the issue.

"At a certain point, there's human error," he said.

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