MAYOR TO FEEL OUT NEW BRIDGE PLAN FOR CITY

Has Proposal He Is Willing To Submit to Public That Means Two Free Bridges Here.

PLANS RECALL OF COUNTY ROAD FUND

Sum of $240,000 Paid Annually by City to County For Highways With No Actual Return.

Two free bridges for Charleston before this summer passes is the promise held out by a plan being considered by Mayor Wertz. Free bridges was one of the planks in the platform on which the mayor asked and received re-election. At that time his plan was to use his influence to obtain an enabling act from the legislature to authorize the county court to lay a county-wide direct levy, but this was blocked by the Kanawha delegation largely for political reasons. The mayor then began casting about for another workable plan. He thinks he has found one.

Briefly, it is to purchase the South Charleston and Kanawha City bridges with the money Charleston and Loudon district property owners pay into the county road fund and with the proceeds of a small bond issue on the property of the city and Loudon district or on the property of the city alone.

Plan Is Unofficial

So far, the mayor's consideration of this plan has been "unofficial." He has studied it just as any a private citizen has speculated on ways and means of riding the strangling clutch of toll bridges. The mayor has not gone into all of the ramifications of his plan, but he has probed deeply enough to reach the conclusion that it is feasible. If it fails, it will fail because the public opposes it for no good reason that can be advanced now.

The mayor knows that free bridges is a sore subject. The three failures to vote a county-wide bond issue for four free bridges and other circumstances have aligned the citizenry of the county in two factions. The residents along the river who would be directly benefitted by free bridges want free bridges; while persons living in the beck districts where they would be only indirectly benefitted, don't want them. As the bond issue would have placed the burden alike on all, the votes of those who did not want the free bridges amounted to more than two-fifths of the whole vote and the bond issues were defeated.

Under the mayor's plan the property of the persons most directly benefitted by the free bridges would bear the burden of freeing the bridges; yet the remainder of the county might have good legal, if not moral grounds for objecting to the plan.

Charleston property owners pay no district road tax. They have their own streets which are maintained out of the city's general tax fund. But Charleston property owners do pay about $240,000 annually into the county road fund, of which not one cent is spent in Charleston. It allows to build and repair roads in the county districts. Charleston is benefitted only indirectly, as indirectly benefitted by these roads as outlying districts would be by a free bridge. And on the contrary, Charleston would be as directly benefitted by a free bridge as the outlying districts are by the better roads which Charleston's $240,000 of tax money makes possible each year.

Should Help City

The mayor thinks that the county districts should be willing to forgo these road improvements for one year and let Charleston get something in return for its money. Particularly so, in view of the fact that Charleston, all three years, has been cheerfully paying out this money and receiving nothing in return. The other district should be as generous. It is not their money, anyhow.

The South Charleston and Kanawha City bridges lead to townes of the same names which are the centers of population in Loudon district. They and greater part of the remainder of the district would be as directly benefitted by free bridges as Charleston. Therefore, the mayor considers it probable that Loudon districts would be willing to join with Charleston in purchasing the two bridges. Loudon pays about $45,000 annually into the county road fund in addition to paying a district road fund tax. But there the similarity stops. Loudon has roads which must be maintained. Possibly the $45,000 could not be spared for the bridges, possibly it could for one year. Possibly part of it could. This is one of the questions to be determined.

Assuming that Loudon could contribute something toward it, the county court was willing to use the road fund money to purchase a bridge, one of the two bridges could be free immediately after July 1, the beginning of the new fiscal or tax year.

Spec Nighth Bond Issue

With one bridge freed, the mayor is confident that Charleston alone, or Charleston and Loudon districts would be willing to vote a bond issue of not more than $300,000 to free the other bridge. It is probable that less than $200,000 would be required. If Charleston and Loudon or Charleston alone would free one bridge with a bond issue, the mayor believes the county as a whole would have no need for objecting to the purchase of the other bridge with money taken from the county road fund—money that Charleston and Loudon property owners paid in taxes.

If the county court was to agree to buy one bridge with this money, contingent on the passage of the bond issue mentioned above, the mayor believes the tax payers of Charleston, at least, would be willing to vote for the small bond issue. Loudon might not be so willing as it is comparatively more heavily bonded than Charleston.

The mayor's plan is based on the assumption that the bridges may be purchased. The owners of the Kanawha City bridge two years ago offered to sell it for about $250,000. The mayor has what he considers reliable information that the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway Company, owners of the South Charleston bridge, intends to build a new bridge, one strong enough to carry the new and heavier locomotives the railway is using, and anxious to dispose of the old bridge at a reasonable price, a price that would

(Continued on Page Eight)
make the total for the two bridges not more than $600,000.

The mayor would like to have expressions of the opinion of the public on his plan. If the public, and by the public he means all and sundry from the biggest to the smallest tax payer, approves of the plan, he will come out officially for it and use every effort to bring about its consummation. Otherwise, he will drop it. He does not intend to make a lone fight.

The mayor assumes that the advantages of free bridges are self-evident, and does set forth any of the many arguments that might be advanced in their favor.

The Charleston bridge issue came to life again yesterday when members of the Kanawha county court stated that they would favor a movement for a bond issue by which to build the needed bridges across the Kanawha river. At the same time E. S. Bock, attorney for the county court, stated that he had examined the statute on the proposition and had found that the court can proceed without further assistance from the West Virginia legislature.

During the last session of the legislature strenuous efforts were made by friends of the bridge issue to get a law passed empowering the court to call a bond election and, in the event it was not ratified by the people, to lay a levy to provide the required funds. During the dying days of the regular session the bill fell by the wayside and was eventually defeated. Whether the court calls the bond election will depend entirely upon the attitude of the public, Commissioner Henry Walker, of the county court, said yesterday. No attempt will be made to raise the issue down the throats of the public, but if the people demonstrate that they want to vote on the proposition, they will be given an opportunity to do so.

Mr. Bock stated that the authority for calling the election is given in chapters No. 47 and No. 43 of the West Virginia code. In one place the law gives the court authority to go ahead and hold the bond election without sounding out the sentiment of the people, while another section provides that the court may ask that the people first file a petition for the calling of the election. The county court indicated that the latter course will be taken.

The movement will, however, have to come from some other source than the county court. Some public-spirited citizens will have to prepare and circulate the petitions and see that they are duly filed with the court. If there are enough signatures, then the bond election will be called. If the bond issue is authorized by the vote of the people, the court will proceed at once to sell the bonds and build the bridges.

There is a variation of opinion relative to whether the bond issue should be borne by the entire county or by the districts alone in which the bridges would be located. It is pointed out that the City of Charleston and Loudon district together pay about 76 per cent of the taxes of the entire county and some are of the opinion that the election should be called in these two districts alone and the bridge building be confined to bridges needed within the city proper. Others are of the opinion that the bridges are necessary to the entire county, inasmuch as the residents of the entire county need them to come and go. If the former plan is followed, a smaller amount will be raised, because of the fewer bridges to be obtained. If the latter plan is followed, it will probably include the construction of a bridge in Jefferson and one in Cabin Creek districts also.

Mr. Bock pointed out yesterday that the money spent in crossing the Kanawha river by ferry and toll bridges would, in a very few years, pay the entire cost of construction of all the needed bridges over the Kanawha river within the county. He said that there are 12 ferries within the county limits. Ferry owners admit that these ferries each take in an average of $50 per day. This means that $315,000 is spent each year by persons crossing the Kanawha river by boat within the county limits. This does not include the thousands of more dollars that are spent by persons crossing the two toll bridges.

The County bridge commission has made no statement of its position on the proposition of calling a bond election, but it is said that members are studying the proposition under the new light cast upon it by Attorney Bock. This commission was appointed several months ago by the county and city authorities to make a study of the bridge situation and to recommend action. This the commission did and the outcome was the introduction of a bill before the legislature, designed to give the county court power to act.

Carl Scholz, prominent engineer and coal operator, is chairman of the commission, and it has held many meetings and conducted exhaustive investigations relative to needs and costs. The county court stated that it would be glad to have the commission take the initiative in circulating the building petition.