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Golden Gate Bridge Suicide Barrier Now Possible Thanks to Proposition 63 Funding

(San Francisco) – California Senate leader and Proposition 63 author Darrell Steinberg was joined at a Golden Gate Bridge press conference today by State Senator Mark Leno, mental health advocates and the Golden Gate Bridge District to illustrate the final funding plan for a suicide barrier at the Golden Gate Bridge. Supporters urged the Golden Gate Bridge, Highway and Transportation District’s Board of Directors to approve a funding plan of \$76 million for their construction when that Board votes on the proposal tomorrow.

“While there are on average one million Californians receiving intensive mental health care and preventative treatment every year thanks to Prop 63, this comparatively modest Prop 63 contribution for suicide prevention at the Golden Gate Bridge will probably become its most publicly recognizable benefit,” said Senator Steinberg (D – Sacramento). “You will likely never hear of the 40,000 San Franciscans who are annually receiving mental healthcare thanks to Prop 63. However, San Franciscans and millions of visitors from around the world will see these suicide barriers that were made possible, in part, by Proposition 63.”

Golden Gate Bridge, Highway and Transportation District’s Board of Directors will meet tomorrow to consider approving a funding plan of \$76 million for the Construction of the Golden Gate Bridge Physical Suicide Deterrent System Project. The project would be funded through combined federal dollars, local tolls, and Mental Health Services Act (Prop 63) funds. The seven million dollar contribution from Prop 63, a final piece of the funding puzzle made possible in this year’s state budget at the prompting of Senator Steinberg and Senator Mark Leno, enables the District to construct the barrier.

“I am proud to partner with Senate President pro Tem Darrell Steinberg to support the state budget allocation of seven million dollars for the suicide prevention net, which will help end the tragic and needless loss of life we have witnessed for decades off the Golden Gate Bridge,” said Sen. Leno. “We must fight mental illness on many fronts, and this budget action is a critical component of saving the lives of people who might not see that their brightest days are ahead of them. This suicide prevention barrier will give them and their loved ones that chance. It will save hundreds of lives.”

The fulfillment of the funding strategy comes after years of advocacy by mental healthcare experts, who have campaigned for financing and against the misinformed presumption that those intent on ending their lives would simply go elsewhere when confronted by a barrier at the Golden Gate. Research shows the opposite effect. A 2009 study in the American Journal of Psychiatry concluded that, “Overall, the data on barriers at jumping sites show that they are effective in reducing suicides from the site itself. In addition, no study has found an increase in suicides from other nearby structures after a barrier is built.”

The Golden Gate has been a magnet for suicides for more than 70 years. Worldwide, it is second only to the Nanjing Yangtze River Bridge in China as the bridge used most frequently by people ending their lives. SAn estimated 1,600 people have committed suicide from the Golden Gate since the bridge opened in 1937. In 2013, while more than 100 would-be jumpers were fortunately stopped by bridge workers, a record number of 46 people killed themselves at the Golden Gate.

“With the allocation of funds to raise the net at the Golden Gate Bridge, we are putting a stop to 77 years of needless deaths and devastation of families. We are finally showing the rest of the world that San Francisco can be as progressive as it claims to be,” said Kevin Hines, who survived a jump from the Golden Gate Bridge. “Suicide nets have gone up all over the globe and saved countless lives. As a native and fourth generation San Franciscan, I am so proud that we are doing the right thing. Thank you all for your tireless efforts on this issue: Senator Steinberg, Senator Leno, Assemblyman Ammiano, the Bridge Rail Foundation, The Psychiatric Foundation of Northern California, Eric Steel and all organizations who have fought for this very outcome. Finally, we are placing higher value and worth on people over a piece of bright red iron.”

The Mental Health Services Act was created under Proposition 63 when passed by the voters in 2004, and since then has generated \$9.5 billion for mental health services through a one-percent tax on personal income exceeding one million dollars. According to the Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission, approximately one million Californians are served annually through Prop 63-funded Full Service Partnerships, Prevention and Early Intervention programs, Behavioral Health Courts, and mental health care in schools and colleges.

“Suicide is an attempt to cope with unbearable pain — usually emotional in nature,” said Dr. David Pating, psychiatrist and Vice Chair of the Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability Commission. “This pain is cyclical and time-limited. For those of us who take calls on the Prop 63-funded San Francisco Suicide Prevention Hotline, we know that if the person can be prevented from dying, the pain can be treated and/or will recede on its own. Today, we are making the bridge safe for people who are temporarily in a lot of pain.”