ATC Policy on Bridges and Stream Crossings

Adopted by the ATC Board of Managers in 1995 and amended by the ATC Board of Directors in 2008

Bridge Location—The footpath of the Appalachian Trail should be located to minimize the need for stream crossings and bridges. However, in some areas, the best route for the Trail may require stream crossings. Fords, step-stones, or bridges should be located and installed to improve safety, minimize impacts to natural resources, or enhance the hiking experience.

Because bridges may detract from the natural, remote, and wild character of the Trail, ATC encourages the use of the simplest means available that will assist in providing a safe passage for Trail visitors. A simple, well-designed ford or a few step-stones may be used for most stream crossings. Unbridged stream crossings may be impassable shortly after a storm or during late winter and spring runoff; others may provide a certain measure of challenge even in low-water conditions. These primitive conditions are essential to the Appalachian Trail experience and deserve protection.

A bridge should be constructed or replaced only if:

It is essential to hiker safety during the snow-free hiking season, recognizing that a stream may be unfordable when seasonal or regular flooding occurs; or

It is absolutely necessary to protect sensitive resources, such as soils along a river's bank.

Coalignment with Public Roads—In situations where the Appalachian Trail is coaligned on or under a bridge with a road or highway, ATC will seek to ensure that state or local departments of transportation include adequate provisions for safe pedestrian use of such facilities. Provisions may include barriers or grade separations between pedestrian and vehicular traffic, adequate roadway/pedestrian-way widths, appropriate surfacing and drainage and other design considerations for the pedestrian pathway, including approach trails or sidewalks at each end of the bridge. These coalignments should be designed according to standards established by the American Association of State Highway Engineers and Traffic Officers (AASHTO). Coalignments should include appropriate signs for motorists and pedestrians and avoid or minimize at-grade crossings by the Trail of the vehicular-way on the bridge. Unless agreement is reached to the contrary, ATC expects that the agency responsible for construction, inspection, and maintenance of the bridge will also be responsible for the design, installation, and maintenance of the pedestrian portion of the coalignment.

Footbridge Design—A footbridge is defined as a permanent, artificial structure not in continuous contact with the ground, regardless of length, width, or height above the surface, with a load-bearing free span between abutments or sills, for passage over streams or wetlands. Bog bridges or puncheon used for Trail hardening and fence stiles are excluded from this policy. For the purposes of this policy, bridges are classified into two categories. Large bridges are those that are 35 feet or more in free span. Small bridges are less than 35 feet in free span. All A.T. bridges, regardless of their span, should be designed to bear a load that meets or exceeds current best management practice for architectural design and engineering of pedestrian structures for remote, recreational trail environments.

Designs for large bridges require review by a qualified engineer. In the event that such a review cannot be provided by an agency partner, the club proposing the bridge will arrange for review by a qualified engineer with oversight provided by ATC. No large bridges will be constructed without approval by ATC pursuant to the following process.

The sponsoring club's proposal for a large bridge should include a summary description of the need for the bridge, a map showing the location, construction details (such as drawings or blueprints) that show the bridge's elevation (side view), maximum span, and the species, diameter, and condition of proposed bridge stringers, and a statement of support or endorsement for the structure from the landowning agency. Finally, the club proposal should include a commitment to periodic inspections and periodic maintenance. The maintenance schedule and procedure should be specified by a qualified engineer during the design phase.