

35W bridge memorial gets \$1.5 million push

By BILL McAULIFFE and ABBY SIMONS, Star Tribune staff writers

Now backed by \$1.5 million from a legal settlement announced Monday, a planned memorial for the victims and survivors of the I-35W bridge collapse finds itself with more funding than expected. And after months of secrecy, final plans could be presented to the public in as few as three weeks.

The “Remembrance Garden,” honoring the 13 dead and 145 injured, would likely be the most expensive memorial in the state — costing more than any war memorial at the State Capitol — while commemorating what one attorney called “the greatest manmade catastrophe our state has ever seen.”

As envisioned, it also would be a significant feature of the redeveloping Minneapolis riverfront and a close companion to the sleek bridge that quickly replaced the 40-year-old crossing that collapsed into the Mississippi River during the afternoon rush hour on Aug. 1, 2007.

The donation comes as part of the \$52.4 million settlement reached to settle claims from the collapse. Survivors at Monday’s news conference announcing the settlement said a permanent memorial is needed for victims and the wider public.

“It would remind everyone what happened here and why, and that it shouldn’t happen again,” said Garrett Ebling, 35, of Andover, who was severely injured in the collapse.

It’s unclear how much money was raised for the estimated \$1 million project prior to Monday’s announce-



Elizabeth Flores, Star Tribune

The state recently won approval to move bridge pieces that have sat near the Mississippi River since 2007.

ment of the \$1.5 million donation by Robins, Kaplan, Miller & Ciresi L.L.P. and other law firms who represented victims. Don Taylor, vice president for development and client services for the Minneapolis Foundation, which is spearheading fundraising for the memorial, said the foundation has a policy to not release such information.

Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak, whose office has organized the planning of the Remembrance Garden, was not available for comment Tuesday. But in a news release, he said the \$1.5 million gift “has lifted the financial challenges we faced.” The statement added that his office will work to build the memorial as

soon as possible.

Rybak spokesman John Stiles said that prior to Monday, the outline of a fundraising plan was in place. The gift will save a lot of time, he said, adding that he couldn’t say for sure whether the plan still will be executed.

Some victims’ families, survivors and others had grown frustrated at the slow pace of arrangements for the Remembrance Garden. Some City Council members also complained privately that the mayor has kept them out of the loop on the latest plans for the memorial.

Stiles said the delay was due to difficult fundraising prior to Monday, and the secrecy was out of respect for victims’

families and survivors, so they could be given a chance to react to details before they were announced.

“It’s just been the number one value for the mayor that the families lead the process,” Stiles said, “and we just never want to get far out in front of them without their knowing where we are going and why we are going there.”

The Remembrance Garden originally was planned for Gold Medal Park, along the Mississippi River near the site of the collapse. However, leasing issues caused the mayor’s office to move the planned site to nearby city park land at the intersection of West River Parkway and 11th Avenue S.

As a result, the design will

change slightly to fit the smaller space, but the plans will retain their character, Stiles said. Thomas Oslund, the architect whose firm designed the memorial, declined to discuss the plans.

Stiles said the city expects to be able to announce the latest plans in about three weeks. Construction should begin soon afterward, he said.

'A healing place'

In budget terms alone, the memorial stands to be the most potent symbol installed so far during what appears to be an era of memorial-building in the region.

The amount allocated to the memorial under the set-

tlement terms is 50 percent more than the \$1 million World War II memorial installed on the State Capitol grounds in 2008.

That was one of at least a half-dozen memorials installed there since the first one, commemorating Minnesotans who served in the Vietnam War, was dedicated in 1992, according to Paul Mandell, principal planner for the Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Board.

A \$425,000 memorial to Minnesota workers killed or injured on the job was dedicated at the Capitol earlier this month. Mandell said three others are in the planning and fundraising stages,

commemorating Hmong aid to the U.S. during the Vietnam war, former U.S. Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey and the families of military service members.

Mandell, who has worked on all the memorials in his 23 years at the Capitol, as well as on a memorial to the late Sen. Paul Wellstone in Eveleth, said memorials succeed if they appeal to a wide range of interests, avoid making political statements and provide a peaceful place to gather.

At the Capitol, he said, memorials should have statewide significance and commemorate events that occurred or people who died at least 10 years before.

The bridge memorial, he added, might achieve even broader support if it honored the agencies and individuals who plunged into the river to pull victims to safety and performed other heroic acts that day. It should provide a spot for peaceful reflection, but also a place where people might picnic or even toss a Frisbee, he said.

"Make it a healing place — one that remembers the greatness of the people and at the same time causes one to reflect on what really happened," Mandell added.

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