

Editorial: No love for locks on bridge

By VIRGINIAN-PILOT EDITORIAL BOARD
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NORFOLK OFFICIALS had their hearts in the right place when "love locks" began appearing on railings along the Hague Bridge a few years ago.

Couples attached the padlocks as a sign of devotion to one another, the keys cast into the water. The act is undeniably romantic, which is why love locks have appeared — and proliferated — in cities around the world.

They first gained international notoriety in Paris, where people (tourists, mostly) secured them to the Pont des Arts over the Seine River, and were believed to be inspired by an Italian young adult novel published in 2006.

However, over time the practice became a problem, even in the City of Love.

Some 700,000 were attached on that one bridge, part of more than 1 million locks across the city, including on the Eiffel Tower. When one section of the Pont des Arts buckled, threatening the popular tour boats that travel the Seine, Paris officials moved to end the practice.

Other cities have experienced this same love-then-hate relationship with the locks, admiring their charming symbolism before souring on the complications they bring and damage they can do.

Now, alas, the time has come for Norfolk to bid adieu to the locks as well.

On Wednesday, city workers wielding saws and bolt cutters began removing the roughly 100 locks remaining on the Hague footbridge. It was a surrender of sorts for the city, which had long resisted action to deter the practice.

In fact, this reckoning only came about at the behest of a few persevering citizens who insisted that officials confront the issue.

Ray Gregory and Georgette Constant were the loudest, most persistent voices arguing the locks were eyesores which marred a shared public vista. They contended that attaching these items to the bridge amounted to graffiti and should be illegal under city statute.

They also noted, correctly, that sharp metal items which protrude into the walkway could be dangerous to runners, cyclists, the handicapped and others passing by. And they cited the experience in Paris, noting that so many locks could compromise the bridge's structural integrity.

Gregory and Constant gathered nearly 300 signatures on a petition that was submitted to City Council, to no avail. They were among a group which cut hundreds of locks off the bridge, reasoning they were within their rights to remove "trash" from a public place.

For being the squeakiest wheels, they have been subjected to all manner of criticism, accused of being mean-spirited for no good reason. A cartoon on this page poked fun at them, echoing the common refrain that with so much wrong with the world, why bother about these symbols of love.

And yet, they made some compelling points.

The bridge is a shared space and a city resource that deserves protection. The locks may not really impede the flow of foot traffic, but could subject the city to liability. And Norfolk cannot in all seriousness enforce its vandalism laws in some instances and ignore it in others.

That is why a court looked favorably on a petition brought by Gregory, Constant and three other citizens to declare the locks a public nuisance. At a January hearing, Norfolk Circuit Court Judge Everett A. Martin admonished the city for not dealing with them sooner, and subsequently granted the request to empanel a special grand jury to consider the issue.

At that point, facing the expenses of defending the (likely) indefensible, the city surrendered. By Wednesday afternoon, the locks were gone.

Many citizens, and even some officials, lament their removal, but there has been talk of erecting a statue near the bridge where folks can share a tender moment and lock their locks without damaging a public resource.

Such a compromise may not be romantic — love is, by its nature, uncompromising — but it would be more appropriate public policy, which is better when driven by the head, and not the heart.

