

State bridges may be in better shape than feared

Many spans could be fixed rather than replaced, freeing money for other bridge work, officials say

Friday, December 17, 2004

JANIE HAR

State transportation engineers estimate that nearly half of the 355 state bridges being fixed as part of a \$1.3 billion effort could be in better shape than previously thought, meaning more money could be available for other bridge projects.

State transportation engineers are reassessing the spans after researchers at Oregon State University learned that despite cracks in the beams, the concrete will still hold up and inspectors could delay posting weight limits on bridges.

That information, combined with reports on individual bridges, means that nearly half the deteriorated bridges could move from the replace list to the repair list and should last at least another 20 years, said Paul Mather, interim deputy director for highways at the Oregon Department of Transportation.

But he cautioned that he won't know for about two years how much money will be saved because the department is just six months into the decadelong bridge and road program legislators approved last year and funded by increasing driver registration, title and commercial truck weight-mile fees.

"They're still cracked. They're still failing," Mather said of the state bridges. "But we're not going to have catastrophic failures. We're not going to have severe restrictions all over the state that will paralyze freight."

Legislators respond with road plan

Lawmakers and Gov. Ted Kulongoski went into the 2003 session determined to fix hundreds of cracked and weight-limited bridges that were choking off key freight routes, creating unwieldy detours through small town main streets and threatening Oregon's economic recovery.

If left unaddressed, department officials stated at the time, Oregon's crumbling bridges could result in the loss of \$123 billion in business revenue and 88,000 jobs by 2025.

Legislators responded by passing a \$2.5 billion road fixing package, of which \$1.3 billion was earmarked for state bridges. Oregon drivers saw their registration fees jump from \$30 every two years to \$54, and title fees from \$30 to \$55. Commercial truckers saw their weight-mile taxes increase 10 percent.

But even lobbyists who griped about the fees last year said they don't mind paying, even with a report that confirms the problem isn't as dire as initially portrayed.

"Had I known then what I know now, I would have been lobbying for a smaller increase," said D.E. Bridges, whose association represents logging truck drivers. But, he said, "there's a lot of other work that needs to be done, repair work and some modernizations, and all of it has good economic value."

Bob Russell, president of the Oregon Trucking Associations, said that after studying the data, "it's fair to say, yes, we do have a bridge problem; yes, we needed to address it; and the funding was

an appropriate response."

The department has about 5 percent of the \$1.3 billion bridge program under construction.

Transportation officials are using as their road map a January 2003 report that outlines the big-picture problem -- about \$5 billion is needed to shore up more than 800 bridges on key freight routes -- as well as the order in which the bridges should be repaired.

Mather said the department commissioned the study in summer 2002 after bridge inspectors realized that field observations were not matching national guidelines set by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials.

Concrete in better shape

Under the association's evaluation guidelines, inspectors assumed the cracked concrete was useless and posted load limits, he said, but researchers found the concrete still contained some strength.

One of the bridges being upgraded from replace to repair is the Moffet Creek bridge on Interstate 84 near Multnomah Falls. Replacing the bridge was expected to cost \$10 million. Mather said he expects repairs to range from \$2 million to \$4 million.

Other such spans include five at the north Albany interchange off Interstate 5, expected to cost \$18 million to replace. Repair costs, he said, will be in the \$2 million to \$4 million range.

The Stanfield interchange on I-84 by Pendleton, he said, would have cost an estimated \$8 million to replace; repair costs will be closer to \$1 million to \$2 million.

Mather hopes to have an updated assessment of Oregon's bridges by March.

Oregon State researchers released their study in September, at a cost of \$1.35 million, and now are devising an automated model for engineers to use in their bridge evaluations.

The results could change national standards, Mather said, and now are being reviewed by the national Transportation Research Board. The board is a division of the National Research Council, which serves as an independent adviser to the federal government.

Mather said Oregon State wasn't asked to assess what was causing the bridges to crack, saying the spans are old and were not built to handle today's volume of trucks. Individual loads, he said, are not the problem.

Sen. Rick Metsger, D-Welches, whose interim legislative committee received a briefing on the report this month, said he credits department officials for being upfront with the research results.

"It's not like 10 years later you find out 100 of those you didn't have to replace," he said. "Maybe we can make our dollars go farther. . . . If we can lower the estimate and still fix the bridges, that's good news."

Janie Har: 503-221-8213; janiehar@news.oregonian.com