

Web site says 7 area bridges are in critical condition

GENESEE COUNTY

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Monday, August 20, 2007

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GENESEE COUNTY - Even as the state launched a new Web site promoting the safety of large bridges in Michigan, counties are struggling to find the money to repair or replace dozens of small, often out-of-the way crossings in poor condition.

The Michigan Department of Transportation site - www.michigan.gov/highwaybridgereport - was up and running last week, listing information about the ratings of 4,402 state highway bridges across the state.

In the county, four state bridges are listed on the state's critical list, including two where repairs are being made this summer - I-75 at W. Court Street and Lahring Road at U.S. 23.

But 20 other smaller spans also need work or replacement and have weight restrictions because of condition. Two are closed and three are being repaired this summer, said John Daly, manager-director of the Genesee County Road Commission.

Gary Goulet of Davison Township said having the Oak Road bridge closed north of him has been both good and bad.

When the 130-foot bridge closed, Goulet said, some trips became more inconvenient, but the closing also cut down on traffic - a welcome change.

"It's a give-and-take thing," said Goulet, who has grown used to taking a slightly longer route to get his children to school since the bridge closed in 2003.

Daly said those living around the Oak Road bridge are fortunate. There is no timetable, for example, for fixing the Lovejoy Road bridge in Argentine Township, which has been closed for more than five years.

The county has responsibility for more than 160 bridges and culverts, and Daly said he supports legislation that would let road commissions borrow to get work done now rather than waiting for costs to rise.

"To me, that's a no-brainer to do. The cost of bridge repairs is going up 7 (percent) to 8 percent per year," Daly said.

In Lapeer County, three bridges are closed in North Branch, Marathon and Oregon townships, said Bill Meinz, the county's highway engineer.

Even though Lapeer County has a small tax that supports bridge repair, there isn't enough money to do all the work, Meinz said. Cities and villages are responsible for bridges within their borders.

"If the bridge is 20 feet or more, it's eligible for federal aid," he said. "If it's less than 20, we're all on our own."

Daly said it's worth considering the addition of tolls to large state bridges and the dedication of revenue to repairs, freeing up money that's dedicated to the job now and using it for local bridges.

He said the recent bridge collapse in Minneapolis most likely will bring more attention to bridge safety as well as more funding.

The state's new posting of bridge information went up Thursday.

Bridge ratings for spans on or over expressways and state roads can be found by county, showing the condition of the bridge deck, sub-structure and superstructure.

The superstructure is the portion of the bridge that supports the deck and connects one substructure element to another. The substructure is the portion of the bridge that supports the superstructure and distributes all bridge loads to below-ground bridge footings, according to MDOT.

Bridges are rated from zero (failed) to 9 (excellent) in each category.

The lowest rating in Genesee County was a "2" for the deck of the M-21 bridge over I-75. A rating that low means the deck is in critical condition with cracking in the concrete.

In Lapeer County, the lowest-rated bridge was M-24 over an abandoned Consolidated Rail line, which had a substructure rating of "2" also.

In Shiawassee County, three state bridges shared the lowest rating - all "3" scores for the bridge superstructures. The bridges are on M-71 at I-69, M-71 at the Holly Drain and old M-78 eastbound at Looking Glass River.

MDOT said in a news release that the state has increased funding to rehabilitate or replace bridges during the last 10 years and increased the number of bridge inspectors from six to 20 since 1996.
