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Replacement of Fort Worth's West Seventh Street bridge starts soon

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The replacement of the West Seventh Street bridge is a two-year project, and it begins in a matter of weeks.

But officials say they've reached a compromise that ensures that the \$25.9 million job will have as little impact as possible on the more than 12,000 motorists who use the bridge each day.

Disruptions will also be minimized in the commercial areas connected by the bridge, including downtown Fort Worth and the fledgling West Seventh mixed-use neighborhood.

"We voiced concern that we were building an urban village, yet we were going to cut off the connection between it and downtown. Some of the businesses are just starting up and just starting to build clientele," said Philip Poole, a west-side architect and board member of the Cultural District Alliance, which represents businesses along the corridor.

He said the compromise "is probably the very best anyone could have hoped for, given that the bridge needed to be replaced."

During the first year of the project, there is to be virtually no interruption in traffic. Contractor Sundt Construction Co. of San Antonio will pre-cast the 12 giant arches and other major components off-site.

Chesapeake Energy will allow use of its property a few blocks north and west of the bridge, near Fifth and Harrold streets, for the pre-casting.

Lane closures will take place between February and November 2013 -- after the Stock Show but before the beginning of the holiday shopping season, officials said.

Hazard in the making

The 99-year-old bridge is being replaced not only to give the west Fort Worth skyline a makeover but also to remove a structure that is decaying to the point that it will eventually become a safety hazard.

In a March 2010 inspection the bridge scored a 38.8 on a 100-point scale, indicating structural deficiency, according to the 2010 National Bridge Inventory, reviewed by the *Star-Telegram*.

State officials noted advanced deterioration and spalling, or flaking off of concrete, and exposed rebar, flaws that could eventually compromise the bridge's ability to support weight.

Despite the bridge's age, it is not considered historically significant because of major changes in the 1950s.

But once the new bridge is in place, future generations may view the project as not only a new physical landmark but also a symbol of an era when the city finally began to get serious about keeping its bridges and other infrastructure in better working order, another official said.

"The bridges weren't getting the attention they deserved," said George Benmanesh, assistant director of transportation and public works. In an interview, Benmanesh said the city is about three years into an effort to rehabilitate its most rundown structures, with the West Seventh bridge at the top of the list because it has scored so poorly in recent inspections yet is heavily traveled.

Rail capable

After the Stock Show ends in February 2013, traffic on the bridge will be reduced to one lane in each direction so workers can remove overhangs and install new columns and the arches.

From July to mid-November 2013, the bridge will be closed. The old structure will be demolished and the new floor beams, panels and slab put in place. During that time, detours will be posted, and motorists will be urged to use West Lancaster Avenue as an alternative.

The contractor is being offered incentives to open the bridge before the holiday shopping season begins in late November 2013, a Texas Transportation Department official said.

Once the new bridge is open to traffic, final work underneath will continue until about January 2014.

"We wanted to address business concerns, including the Stock Show and other big events," Transportation Department spokeswoman Jodi Hodges said. "We're going to minimize all that impact. Normally, if you're going to build a bridge like that, you would close the bridge for a year or more."

The bridge will also be built with specially designed supports so railroad tracks can easily be added if the city later wishes to connect downtown and the West Seventh area by streetcars or other rail-based transit.

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