

Repairs to close Ambridge-Aliquippa bridge until 2012

By Tom Fontaine
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Repairs to the deteriorating Ambridge-Aliquippa Bridge will create lengthy detours and delays for a year and a half.

But repair work cannot wait, PennDOT District 11 Executive Dan Cessna said Friday.

"We have to get in there and do this work. Otherwise, the bridge simply wouldn't last much longer. It would have to be closed," said Cessna, whose district includes Allegheny, Beaver and Lawrence counties.

Work on the span, which stretches almost 2,000 feet over the Ohio River, is scheduled to get under way in spring. Renovations will be handled in two phases, beginning with structural steel repairs and deck replacement through late November, then bridge painting from early to late summer 2012. The project is expected to cost \$20 million to \$25 million.

"It's been a long time since anything significant has been done with this bridge," Cessna said.

It will take motorists awhile to bypass the Beaver County bridge.

PennDOT's suggested detour will be 11 miles long. Drivers on the eastern side of the Ohio River, in Ambridge, will be advised to take Route 65 south to Sewickley, cross the congested Sewickley Bridge, then head north on Route 51 from Moon to the Aliquippa area.

An alternative would be to use the East Rochester-Monaca Bridge to the north, a detour of about 16 miles.

The East Rochester-Monaca Bridge is reduced to a single lane because of repairs on Route 51, but restrictions will be lifted before the Ambridge-Aliquippa Bridge project starts, Cessna said. Likewise, work on Interstate 79 that funneled detour traffic onto the Sewickley Bridge should be completed by then, he said.

An estimated 12,500 vehicles daily cross the Ambridge-Aliquippa Bridge, built in 1927. The bridge, considered structurally deficient by PennDOT, has a 17-ton weight limit -- a restriction that will remain after the project's completion.

Aside from the impact on regular motorists, buses transporting children between South Heights on the west side of the Ohio River and Ambridge Area School District schools on the east side will be affected. South Heights is the only district community located across the river.

Roberta Jones, borough manager of South Heights, said her children were school-age the last time the bridge shut down for a year in the 1980s.

"I remember being a wreck about it. I was even willing to pay Hopewell (Area School District, on the west side of the Ohio River) to take my kids, but they wouldn't," Jones said. "At the end of the day, we adjusted and got through it. That's all you can do."