

Commission: County has no funds to replace Ripley bridge

By ED HOWELL
Eagle News Editor

It could be a number of years before Walker County can afford to build a new \$1.5 million bridge to replace the one closed by federal inspectors last week on the Ripley Cutoff Road over Lost Creek.

Even if funding is taken care of, there are also environmental concerns such a project could harm the habitat of an endangered turtle, said county engineer David Edgil.

Edgil said state inspectors suddenly closed the bridge a week ago today for being structurally unsound.

The closing was not discussed during Monday's meeting of the Walker County Commission. However, afterward officials said they were surprised by the closing.

"We felt they would lower the limits on it," said District 2 Commissioner Larry Farris. "We were not expecting them to close it."

"We're sorry for the folks that do have to detour there. It wasn't up to us," he

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County engineer David Edgil



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Commission — From A1

said.

Edgil said in 2002 that the county received \$3.25 million from the state to replace four bridges in the county with the voter-approved funds: Mill Creek Bridge on Smith Lake Dam Road, Myers Road bridge in the Rosehill community, Cedar Lake bridge below Goodsprings and Ripley Cutoff bridge.

The bridge program was part of an initiative mounted by Gov. Don Siegelman, known then as Amendment One when voters approved it as an amendment to the state constitution. Voters in 2000 approved spending \$250 million statewide to replace bridges. The state had nearly 3,000 structurally deficient bridges, with more than half that could not be crossed by school buses, fire trucks and ambulances.

The amendment allowed the state to spend some of the oil and natural gas royalties that previously went to the Alabama Trust Fund.

Edgil said Monday the Mill Creek project was completed, while Cedar Lake will be done by early this spring and Meyers Road will have a new bridge in place by early summer.

"We were fortunate to get three bridges," District 1 Commissioner Dual Tubbs said.

Farris explained that for the Ripley Cutoff, commissioners had anticipated other city and county governments to turn down projects for various reasons, allowing some funds to be leftover for the Ripley project. However, those other commissions and councils were given an extension to work out their own problems, leaving no leftovers for Walker County to apply for.

Edgil said the county usually gets \$500,000 annually in federal funding that could be used for the bridge, but those funds are tied up in projects through 2007.

Meanwhile, replacing the bridge would likely cost as much as \$1.5 million, Farris and Edgil said.

The county has no spare funds to replace the bridge on its own, said Bruce Hamrick,

chairman of the commission.

"We need another state road and bridge bond issue. This was just a drop in the bucket," Hamrick said.

Edgil said money isn't the only problem. The flattened musk turtle, classified by the federal government as an endangered species, is known to be living in the area of the bridge, both in the creek and on the sides of the creek.

The county has been instructed that it cannot work on either side of the creek for 350 feet from May through September, and county officials cannot work in the stream bed from October through April.

Edgil said the only recourse would be to get wildlife experts to do additional testing to determine the effect any bridge construction would have on the turtle's habitat.

He said a similar experience at Cedar Lake proved slow going, as it took three years to resolve — and in that case, the turtle was only on the shoreline of the lake, not in the lake bed.

Even with the environmental aspects out of the way, it would take about two or three years to build up funds from the federal allotment to use for a new Ripley Cutoff Bridge, starting with 2008 funds. County officials have not even acquired the right-of-way needed for the project.

Moreover, county officials would have to provide a 20 percent match for any new bridge, which could wind up costing the county \$300,000, Edgil said.

Currently the annual federal funding is scheduled to be used for several resurfacing projects. They include a \$1 million project to resurface Tutwiller Road from Highway 69 to Highway 269. It also includes resurfacing Wire Road from Highway 124 to Holly Grove Road, an area which will serve as a tie-in to the Townley exit of Corridor X (Interstate 22). Resurfacing is also scheduled to take place on Burr's Crossing Road from Highway 69 to Drummond Road.

Indictment — From A1

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