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## Keystone Bridge project update arrives with new timeline and added cost

Submitted by admin on Tue, 07/26/2022 - 15:24



By Willis Patenaude, Times-Register

A long-awaited update on the Keystone Bridge project came at the July 18 Elkader City Council meeting, as the cause behind the delay, what's going to be done, increased costs and the current timeline were all discussed.

The project ground to a halt on April 20, after movement was observed on a crack near the south end of the east arch barrel, most likely due to the "isolated deterioration" of the stones in that area. This effectively put the brakes on major construction operations and shut down

pedestrian access while efforts to find a solution were explored.

That solution, which is to install a shoring structure to stabilize the bridge and reopen pedestrian access, was originally supposed to arrive in mid-June. That proved not to be the case, leading to further delays. According to

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project engineer Nate Miller from Origin Design, one of the reasons this occurred was the inability to use a pre-designed/modular system to shore up the bridge due to what he described as the “loads involved” with the project, which are both vertical and horizontal and outside the capabilities of modular systems.

More specifically, the arches presented a problem because they are not a “common construction technique,” which necessitated building a custom shoring design. That caused further delays as the contractor had to locate a company that was both willing to take on the project and could deliver a customized design capable of handling the aforementioned loads involved.

This was delayed because the “options available to the contractor for design were more limited than previously anticipated,” Miller explained.

He mentioned that, while major operations ceased, the contractor continued to work where it could, installing pins on the north and south faces of the west arch, injecting grout in the west abutment, west arch and center pier, repairing cracks in the stone, tuck-pointing and stone cleaning.

Now, the project comes with a significant construction timeline and a hefty cost increase.

According to the timeline provided by Miller at the meeting, construction of the shoring design was anticipated to begin once it has approval from the Iowa DOT, which was expected prior to this writing. Once that gets underway, pedestrian access should be restored by Sept. 13 and the shoring structure should be removed by Jan. 11, 2023. The entire project is expected to conclude by Dec. 28, 2023.

The proposed east arch repair plan, as it was labeled in the update memo provided by Miller, includes the construction of a new causeway to facilitate access to the west half of the bridge and installation of the temporary shoring system. Construction will fully resume upon completion of masonry restoration efforts, as long as there are no expected supply chain delays. Miller noted weather should have no impact on the timeline either.

The causeway led to some debate at last week’s council meeting, especially with concern to its elevation and possible flood events. Currently, the project proposal is to construct the causeway to an elevation of 721 feet, which would provide protection in the case of a 10-year flood event.

That was chosen because of the unlikelihood of a flood during that time of construction and because it is the “most economical repair option for the city,” Miller stated in the interview.

However, council members Tony Hauber and Deb Schmidt both questioned whether it would be worth it to pay more to reduce the risks should a flood occur. One of the major risks is not so much flooding itself, but the debris that would come with it, which is a concern even without the flood. In a worst case scenario, it has the potential to completely collapse the bridge, especially if it occurs during the 10 days it’s going to take to remove and replace the six limestone blocks necessary to fully stabilize the ridge and repair the deteriorated stones.

This prompted questions about recent flood levels and flood history during the months of expected construction. Miller stated the “temporary shoring will be installed during the time of year with historically lower river levels,” which minimizes risk.

City administrator Jennifer Cowsert mentioned during the meeting that floods have occurred during the later summer months, though, specifically in August. But she also added that, typically, it’s not the case.

In any event, the risk was enough to prompt the council to ask for cost estimates to raise the causeway.

Outside the meeting, council member Eric Grau stated he is “very concerned” about the potential of a flood event, citing the risk involved. He also wants to “continue to investigate” the cost of raising the causeway to mitigate that risk.

One council member not as concerned is Peggy Lane, who said in an interview that, “given the cost of raising the causeway,” she was “satisfied with the plan as presented.” She is, however, open to reviewing the cost estimates associated with raising it and evaluating it to make a final determination.

As for the contractor, Moyna Materials President John Moyna was in attendance at the meeting and stated the 10-year flood height is “what [he] would go for.”

Another large issue that comes with the east arch repair plan is the additional cost. In total, the additional project costs are estimated to be \$1,945,000, while additional engineering costs are estimated at \$545,000.

The question quickly became how to pay for this, since this will not be covered under the Iowa DOT funding. One source is to utilize the available \$132,000 in American Rescue Funds, but this met with some resistance. According to Cowsert, other options are using the extra money from the Carter Street project, estimated to be about \$550,000, along with potentially raising \$150,000 through fundraising and looking into grants through the Upper Mississippi Gaming Corporation and the Historical Resource Development Program.

Cowsert noted conversations have taken place with federal and state representatives in an effort to cover the costs.

“We will try anything and everything we can do,” Cowsert said.

However, the most likely scenario that will fund the additional project cost is through bonding, which essentially means increased property taxes. According to Cowsert’s early numbers, that equals an additional \$562 per year for a house with an assessed value of \$150,000.

Cowsert stated bonding is a “last resort” option, given that the city just bonded for Carter Street last year and there is growing concern over the debt levy.

Two council members commented on the potential for higher taxes, including Lane.

“None of us likes to pay higher taxes. Mine will go up as well. Part of living in an urban area is sharing the costs of projects such as this,” she said.

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Grau added, "We live in a town that is on a river with an iconic bridge. I would argue that some of the attractiveness of this town to tourists is due to the bridge, which brings in revenue for merchants. That said, the town is doing everything it can to find additional funding sources that would make increasing property taxes unnecessary."

There were some additional conversations revolving around the crack itself, which according to Miller has been known about since the late-1970s. "Various efforts have been implemented throughout the years in an attempt to monitor and stabilize the area, with varying degrees of success," he said.

"The current repair plan is by far the most extreme, takes advantage of the significant scientific advancements in the science of masonry restoration and will provide the greatest degree of stability," Miller continued in an interview.

But the existence of the crack had Schmidt questioning whether the cracked stone was checked prior to the project starting. At the meeting, Miller stated it was not checked, but spot checks were done in other areas and revealed no deterioration. Based on those spot checks, it was determined they were representative of the condition of the surrounding stones.

According to Miller, this is standard industry procedure, but the cracked stone also went unchecked due to the limitations of the snooper truck used to access the outside of the spandrel walls. Had the deterioration been noticed prior to construction starting, the current cost and timeline would have remained basically unaffected, however, pedestrian access would have seen minimal disruption.

In an interview, Cowser addressed this issue, stating, "If they observe a crack for decades and it has not moved, then there is no reason to be concerned about it...Once they dig out the dirt in the location above the crack, I will be interested to know if they can tell why the stones in that particular area failed while stones on other areas of the bridge have not...[but] I believe we trust the professionals we hire to inspect the bridge. If they had told us it was a concern, we would have looked at it."

There seems to be basic agreement on the major points of the plan, other than waiting for estimates on raising the causeway and how to pay for it.

Lane said, "the current plan is an acceptable solution to the problem," and while she indicated it could've been done more timely, the timeline "seems to be reasonable."

Grau was more matter-of-fact: "It is what it is. Nobody is happy with how long it is taking or how much it costs, but the most important thing is that, if we are spending this much money, it must be done right."

The most empathic response came from Hauber, who said, "The plan is excellent. I think the designers, engineers and contractors have done exceptional work to bring us this solution."

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