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The Keystone Bridge Project will soon come to an end, but paying for it won't

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The Keystone Bridge Rehabilitation Project continued throughout the summer with construction crews working on paving the south and north halves of the 10-inch reinforced concrete bridge deck. Photo credit - Jeremy Croell

By Willis Patenaude

The Keystone Bridge Rehabilitation Project has continued on in recent months without incident, marking a departure from



An ariel view of the Keystone Bridge Project that is expected to be finished by the end of 2023.

In addition, the elevated sidewalk will require the construction of a temporary falsework system between the cantilevered steel support brackets to provide support until the concrete reaches sufficient strength to support itself. After that, the placement of the concrete sidewalk and the steel railing will be constructed and installed, while the installation of lighting, sidewalks, and various finishing activities will continue throughout the process. As will any ongoing masonry restoration efforts.

When it comes to making the new deadline, and understanding all that could potentially interrupt the project, such as delays from weather or in obtaining material, especially those associated with railing, Miller remained confident that the project will be completed before 2024.

"All parties involved are committed to opening the bridge to pedestrian and vehicular traffic by the end of the year. There are no anticipated weather-related delays related to the masonry or concrete work as these items are scheduled to be completed prior to cold winter temperatures," Miller said.

As for any delays from access to materials, Miller restated the prior assessment, while noting how closely city staff and the contractors have worked throughout the project to ensure the new timeline remains uninterrupted and is completed on schedule. Miller also noted there are several contingency plans in effect, "to ensure that access to the bridge will be restored by the end of the year." However, he did not detail what those contingency plans were, but acknowledged there is a plan in place should any unforeseen issues arise.

As for the future of the bridge after it is completed, Miller noted that the project is intended to completely rehabilitate the bridge and extend its longevity for another 50-years, but he also acknowledged that over that timeframe, there will be ongoing masonry restoration efforts and maintenance activities required. Those efforts include tuck-pointing, isolated limestone dressing, and dutchman repairs, which Miller said, "are unavoidable with structures of this age and construction."

last year's months long saga over a cracked stone that delayed the project, preventing it from making its original completion date of November 2022, but according to project engineer, Nate Miller, the end of major project elements of late-December 2023, is near.

Since that fateful April last year, when a work stoppage created so much hullabaloo, the crack has been excised and replaced and other vital activities commenced and have been finished in the intervening months, such as the removal of the existing roadway surface, excavation of fill, core drilling of the spandrel walls, installation of the tie-rod sheathing, pouring the concrete tie-rod encasements, placement of the waterproofing membrane, placement of the subgrade, and setting reinforcement.

The above system, "will provide a rigid surface to distribute traffic loads more uniformly to the limestone arch below, minimize any moisture intrusion to the masonry structure of the bridge, and effectively stabilize the spandrel walls," Miller said.

Perhaps the most notable activity in recent months has been the paving of the south and north halves of the 10-inch reinforced concrete bridge deck between June 20th and September 6th. The paving of the bridge deck is another component of a deck system that is designed "to stabilize and protect the bridge and provide the required support for the cantilevered sidewalk," Miller added.

Though the end is approaching, more remains to be done, especially with regard to the construction of the cantilevered sidewalk, which will require the pouring of the north curb section and attaining the required cure time, attaching the steel sidewalk framing to the tie-rods, pre-tensioning of the tie-rods, and pouring the elevated concrete sidewalk. The length of this set of activities is set to take 25-days.

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But the project is more than fixing cracks, masonry work, laying pavement, and installing a railing. There is a price to pay for the work and inevitably, the delay that extended the project more than a year and that price has approached nearly \$7 million dollars. The majority of that total has been covered by various sources, including \$3.97 million from the Iowa DOT, along with almost \$500,000 in federal dollars.

Additional sources include the original project bond of \$655,000, extra money from the Carter Street project in the amount of \$600,000, American Rescue Funds contributed just over \$132,000, an Upper Mississippi Gaming Corporation Grant provided another \$15,000, a Historic Resources Development Program emergency grant was received for \$9,000, and city fundraising efforts have amassed just over \$10,000. All totaled, these sources have cut the project cost by \$1.42 million dollars.

However, that leaves the city on the financial hook for \$1.53 million dollars, and unless local fundraising efforts are able to contribute more substantially over the next several months, that amount will require the city to take out a loan sometime in Mid-2024, once the project is officially closed out. That loan will impact not just the city's ability to fund future projects, but it will also impact the taxpayer, though City Administrator Jennifer Cowsert could not specifically state how much.

"A debt service is a levy on the taxes so there will be a future tax burden. There are a lot of factors such as interest rates, the term, the total assessed value of all land in the community, the amount of rollback, etc. so I am hesitant to provide an exact amount," Cowsert said.

When it comes to the financial health of the city once the Bridge project is complete, Mayor Josh Pope expressed concern, but remained "hopeful" the city would be able to find additional money to decrease the debt service necessary. Mayor Pope did concede that if the city did have to issue a bond, "it will affect [the city's] borrowing capacity long-term."

On the issue of financial health, only Councilmember Deb Schmidt provided a statement, saying, "I can't comment until the final bill about costs...But I can say that the cost will certainly affect our decisions as a council." Schmidt did add that the overall project was "well worth it" and that the bridge "keeps our town viable and that adds to the reason we are a destination spot."

Responding to the sluggish fundraising numbers, which has prompted City Councilmember Tony Hauber to establish a sort of Bridge fundraising group, Cowsert continues to believe that the main reason fundraising has been difficult, "is because once the crack was repaired they were able to continue working. There was not a work stoppage until we raised the extra money. We used interim financing instead. So the situation didn't seem as dire."

In any event, barring any other delay, the bridge will be fully operational by the end of December 2023, something Mayor Pope believes the community is "anxious" for, while also remarking, "Once complete it will continue to be an important asset for the community for years to come."

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