Aging bridges a concern

Funding not allocated to fix problems

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Local officials are trying to find ways to deal with dozens of timber bridges that are beginning to show serious aging problems.

Last fall, Lafayette Consolidated Government closed the bridge on Robley Drive, near the Vermilion Parish line. A bridge in the 500 block of Canaan Drive was closed earlier this year, and officials say they don’t know when either bridge will reopen.

Fontenot said there are dozens of timber-supported bridges in Acadiana, many of which are several decades old and are beginning to show problems with pilings, the caps that sit atop the pilings and other portions of the structures, said Bill Fontenot, state Department of Transportation and Development district engineer administrator.

“There are a great number of our bridges that were built many years ago that are timber, and timber eventually deteriorates to the point where it requires repair or replacement,” Fontenot said.

“We’re seeing that show up on many state and local bridges.”

In the cases of the Robley and Canaan bridges, both are expected to remain closed.

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until funding becomes available to replace them. When that money will be available, however, is unknown.

"There are no identified funds for Canaan and Robley right now," LCG engineer Mitch Wyble said. "We can't do anything until we've got the money."

Because the Robley bridge lies on the parish line, negotiations have been ongoing between LCG and Vermilion Parish officials about ways to pay for the replacement of the bridge, said Gerald Butaud, president of the Vermilion Parish Police Jury.

Officials have estimated it could cost $800,000 to $900,000 to replace the Robley bridge. Last year, the Lafayette City-Parish Council considered moving $900,000 into a fund to replace the bridge, but instead chose to use the money for turning lanes on La Neuville Road.

Butaud said Vermilion Parish is only planning to contribute $100,000 to replace the bridge.

"The Robley bridge is assigned to Lafayette Parish through the state," he said. "We have 40-something bridges of our own in Vermilion Parish that we need to repair. We're responsible for $100,000 for that one, and that's what we are going to contribute."

Wyble said the Robley bridge was closed after the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development and LCG inspectors noted that the wooden pilings that support the bridge were showing signs of wear.

Officials first reduced the weight limit on the bridge to try to prevent vehicles with heavier loads from possibly causing more damage to the bridge. The weight reduction is often a first step in trying to prevent more damage to the bridges.

But Wyble said another bridge, in Maurice, was temporarily closed around the same time as the reduction went into effect, and officials believe some overweight vehicles may have been crossing the Robley bridge, causing further damage.

Another inspection showed more severe problems, including wooden pilings splitting down the middle. Officials then made the decision to close the bridge to all traffic.

Wyble said the Canaan Drive bridge was closed earlier this year after DOTD inspectors noted major problems with the caps, which sit on top of the pilings and help support the bridge.

Already this year, several area bridges have had to be temporarily closed for repairs, including one on Arnaudville Road near the Lafayette/St. Martin Parish line, one on La. 35 south of Kaplan in Vermilion Parish and one on La. 103 between Washington and Port Barre in St. Landry Parish.

Wyble said officials suspect a drunken driver struck a portion of the Arnaudville Road bridge, causing severe damage that workers quickly corrected.

Fontenot said the La. 35 bridge was damaged after an overweight load crossed it. That bridge was open again in a little less than two weeks. The one on La. 103 needed some standard maintenance and repairs, which were conducted within about two days.

All bridges are inspected at least once every two years, Fontenot said. If officials reduce the weight limit on a bridge because of structural concerns, that bridge is inspected every six months, Fontenot said. Closures come when officials deem that a bridge is unsafe for any type of traffic.

"DOTD is vigilant about continuing to monitor and assure that these bridges are able to serve the rated loading capacity and carry the traffic safely," Fontenot said. "They are being replaced on a programmatic basis as funding allows."