Bridging the gap

State & local governments find it tough to replace old bridges

By Bill Decker
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If you drive across Louisiana bridges without a second thought, here's a second thought:

Eight Acadiana bridges used by an average total of 50,000 vehicles each day have at least one major component considered to be in critical condition by bridge inspectors.

But here's a third thought: If you obey posted weight and speed limits, you should be safe.

But he also believes that, when it comes to replacing old bridges, the state government will find it difficult to do much more than tread water at current funding levels.

The following is a list of bridges with a high traffic volume and "2"-rated components. If repair or replacement is planned, that information is also included.

ST. MAURICE

• U.S. 90 over Wax Lake Outlet, February 1994, $6.5 million.

VERMILLION

• La. 315 bridges, November 1997, $600,000.
Bridge: Gap

The bridge has a relatively low traffic volume - 768 vehicles a day - but it also has two "2" ratings - substructure and superstructure. Contracts for a $1.2 million replacement project are scheduled to be awarded in November 1995.

Three smaller bridges, all low-volume, that carry traffic over the Bayou Teche, Halfmoon Bayou and a coulee.

The only Acadiana bridge on the list with a rating of "1," a Lafayette Parish bridge over a coulee, was replaced in 1992.

The DOTD anticipates a total of more than $50 million to be available from state and federal sources for the bridge program though the 1999 budget year. In all, 33 bridge projects are scheduled for Fontenot's district.

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The state and federal government spends $40 million and $50 million on Louisiana bridges each year.

The Federal Bridge Replacement and Rehabilitation Program has helped the state replace 132 bridges worth about $18 million in eight Acadiana parishes.

The district has 902 "off-system" bridges, and the DOTD has closed 25 of them as unsafe for travel. The bridge program has replaced 20 city and parish bridges in the last two years.

Bridge construction on major four-lanes are being helped by Louisiana's "TIME" program, for which voters approved a 15-year, 4 cent gasoline tax increase five years ago. DOTD Secretary Jude Patin recently testified before lawmakers that the department badly underestimated some of the projects for which the TIME money was planned. He asked that the tax be extended for 17 years, according to The Associated Press.

But is all that enough?

Fontenot believes in the inspection program and its ability to keep people off unsafe bridges.

"But bridges, there's no doubt, are deteriorating faster than we're replacing them," he said.