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HEIGHTS

Funding secured to replace bridge, Cohen reports

By Allen Jones

Federal funding has been secured to help replace the deteriorating Yale Street Bridge, Houston City Councilwoman Ellen Cohen reported in an Aug. 6 memo.

"After much hard work from the city of Houston and the Texas Department of Transportation, out-of-cycle funding for the Yale Street Bridge has been secured," the District C representative wrote in the memo. "If everything moves ahead as anticipated, with no unexpected glitches, we may have a new bridge in five years."

TxDOT and the city will meet this month to discuss engineering details, she wrote.

Information about the amount of funding was unavailable at presstime.

The money will come from leftover funds available through the the federal Bridge Inventory, Inspection and Appraisal funding program. The development means the city won't need to wait until November to apply for funding through the program to help cover the cost of bridge replacement, Cohen wrote.

The maximum traffic-load rating of Yale Street Bridge, which crosses White Oak Bayou, was reduced in January after a TxDOT safety inspection indicated parts of the bridge structure had weakened since it was built in 1931.

Although the bridge is considered safe for use by general motorists, the city is prohibiting its use by all commercial trucks to extend the life of the structure until funding to replace it can be obtained.

TxDOT had been expected to nominate the bridge for the federal funding program this fall to cover 80 percent of construction costs with TxDOT and the city splitting the remaining 20 percent.

After the January inspection, TxDOT reduced the bridge's rating from a previous maximum weight of 40,000 pounds for a single-axle truck to 8,000 pounds per single axle.

Yale Street Bridge was not designed to carry an 18-wheel truck with today's standard loads, said Daniel Menendez, deputy director of the city's engineering and construction division.

In a July 2 letter addressed to representatives of five Heights-area community groups, Menendez indicated a "new bridge will be designed to handle appropriate loading for major thoroughfare vehicular traffic" with a 50-year lifespan. Because the bridge is on the National Register of Historic Places, any replacement designs of the bridge, he noted, would include features that replicate existing aesthetics. Prohibited from using the bridge are commercial trucks and other heavy-load vehicles such as fire trucks and school buses. On Nov. 22, the city installed signs noting commercial truck restrictions and indicating an alternate route.

"Despite the age and limited design capacity of the structure, the Yale Street Bridge is in good condition and is safe for the posted load limits," Menendez wrote.

"Though the bridge has restrictions, the continued use of the bridge under the restricted condition will not adversely affect the bridge."

In addition to the signs, the Houston Police Department's Truck Enforcement Unit has been monitoring the bridge for violations on a daily basis.

A coalition of the five area community organizations, however, do not believe HPD has the resources to enforce the bridge's commercial truck restriction.

The coalition is composed of the Houston Heights and Woodland Heights associations, the Greater Heights and Washington Avenue Corridor Super Neighborhood councils and a group called Responsible Urban Development for Houston.

According to a July 24 press statement issued by the coalition, its "members are concerned that ongoing use by commercial vehicles threatens to further degrade the bridge."

Representatives of the organizations met with Cohen on July 23 to discuss how funds can be procured to quickly rebuild the bridge. In addition to meeting with community groups, Cohen said she also has taken measures to ensure the safety of the bridge.

She said those measures include securing additional city safety inspections of the bridge, working closely with police to report use of the bridge by commercial vehicles.

Another move has been to establish a dialogue with commercial retailers and developers “to underscore the importance of adhering to the new weight restrictions,” she said.

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Tony Bullard / For the Chronicle

Exposed rods and deteriorating concrete betray the age of the Yale Street Bridge, built in 1931.