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County orders ailing Nanticoke bridge to close
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The aging Nanticoke-West Nanticoke Bridge was ordered closed effective immediately amid concerns about public safety due to its deteriorating condition, county officials said Thursday.

“This decision has been made in response to the recent inspection that was conducted which saw advanced deterioration of load carrying members,” County Manager Romilda Crocarno said in a statement. “Luzerne County is working in coordination with PennDOT District 4 to implement this closure.”

The county will release additional information about the closure at a later date, she said.

The abrupt news of the closure caught even local officials and first responders off guard.

“It’s short notice,” said Nanticoke Mayor Kevin Coughlin, who learned about the closure as it was happening Thursday. He said he expects the bridge to be out of service for at least several years. “I just hope they move on finding a new engineer and everything and sort of fast track this to help our city and everybody who uses that bridge.”

The subject of the bridge’s safety has been an ongoing concern for the county as well as area residents, with Plymouth Twp. supervisors seeking an exemption last May to allow Nanticoke City’s emergency vehicles to use it to respond to calls in the West Nanticoke section of the township.

The video player is currently playing an ad.

The city’s fire department is the primary responder for the township’s West Nanticoke section, while its ambulance is the primary responder to all of Plymouth Twp.

Township Supervisor Gale Conrad and Nanticoke Fire Chief Mark Boncal joined about 20 residents in seeking the exemption after the county, which owns the aging bridge, deemed it structurally deficient and imposed a maximum 5-ton per-vehicle weight limit.

The exemption did not materialize, however, forcing firefighters and medics responding to West Side emergencies to take the the next-closest span — the Route 29 bridge via Hanover Twp. — which doubles response times to West Nanticoke from about 3½ minutes to 7 minutes.

Now, with all motorists being forced to use the alternate route, traffic congestion in the area is expected to worsen.

Nanticoke Police Chief Mike Roke said traffic has already been backing up in the area, with congestion accumulating on Main Street and in Hanover Twp.

“On the community, it’s going to have a major impact,” Roke said. “The traffic problem is going to be at the forefront of what we’re going to have to deal with now that the bridge is closed.”

Roke said he too was surprised by the abrupt closure and that he had not received further information beyond the county's brief announcement.

"This basically tells me that bridge is going to be closed indefinitely and will never be open again. That's my opinion," Roke said, noting that county officials knew this week's inspection had been approaching. "There was no contingency plan. They did not have anything."

Roke also noted the closure could have a major impact on area business, including a used car lot and a gas station that are now cut off from West Nanticoke.

"That business is driven by traffic. They didn't even tell him," Roke of the car dealership's owner. "I don't know what he's going to do. It's going to close his business. ... It's a dead end road now. It's a road to nowhere with two businesses at the end of it."

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The Nanticoke/West Nanticoke Bridge over the Susquehanna River is closed due to recent inspection findings, Luzerne County Manager Romilda Crocamo announced Thursday. jandes@timesleader.com

Crocamo said closure of the county-owned span is necessary "in the interest of public safety" because the inspection detected advanced deterioration of load-carrying bridge components, according to an email she sent to council.

The closure will be permanent as the county pursues bridge replacement options, Crocamo said.

The county is in the process of selecting an engineer who must come up with three options to address the bridge.

In addition to \$10 million in federal funding allocated through the state for this project, the county has access to a \$55 million casino gambling fund established for county infrastructure.

The weight limit of the bridge was reduced to 5 tons last May, which allows passenger vehicles but not fire trucks and emergency rescue vehicles.

Inspections were required every six months due to the bridge's condition, officials had said.

Totaling 2,072 feet, the bridge connects Nanticoke and the West Nanticoke section of Plymouth Township. The crossing was constructed in 1914 and last rehabilitated in 1987.

Three options were already presented for the bridge early last year by Alfred Benesch and Associates, which had been hired by the county before federal funding was involved.

However, the county must start from scratch in determining a solution for the bridge because federal funding has been allocated to the project through the state, officials have said. Benesch's work thus far cannot be applied to the final project because the selection process for the engineer must go through the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation procurement system, officials have said.

Crocamo said the county is working in coordination with PennDOT to implement the closure, promising additional information at a later date.

"The public's cooperation in this matter is greatly appreciated," Crocamo said.