

State to replace Nitro-St. Albans bridge



Lawrence Pierce

State officials hope to replace the Dick Henderson Memorial Bridge, connecting Nitro and St. Albans across the Kanawha River, by the end of 2012.

By [Alison Knezevich](#)



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Local leaders have been pushing the state to build a new bridge because the current one's age has prompted safety concerns.

NITRO, W.Va. -- State highways officials have pledged to replace the aging bridge connecting Nitro and St. Albans, possibly by the end of 2012.

"We understand that this is a very, very vital link," engineering official Dirar Ahmad of the Division of Highways told Nitro residents Thursday.

But drivers should expect the bridge, officially known as the Dick Henderson Memorial Bridge, to be shut down for nearly a year, starting in the spring of 2012.

The state wants to more than double the width of the two-lane bridge, giving it three lanes -- one for turning -- and a wider sidewalk, Ahmad said. Workers will tear down the bridge and build a new one on the existing piers.

The project will cost \$30 million to \$35 million, with the federal government covering about 80 percent and the state paying for the rest.

Some people had pitched the idea of a new bridge in a different location, near Walnut Street in Nitro. That would have cost up to \$180 million, and the state simply can't afford it right now, Ahmad said.

Local officials have been pushing the state to replace the deteriorating bridge, built in 1934, for years.

"It's narrow and it's old and it's got a lot of people nervous," Nitro Mayor Rusty Casto said.

Construction will be a big inconvenience, but "we just got to get ready and do it," he said.

In 2008, state highway officials reduced the bridge's maximum weight limit from 14 to 12 tons. Buses and heavy trucks can't cross it.

KRT had stopped running buses across the bridge in 2007, after a bridge collapsed in Minneapolis and killed 13 people. KRT General Manager Dennis Dawson said Thursday he is pleased with the state's plan.

"It sounds like a reasonable approach to a big problem," he said.

Nitro's business community, though, is worried about losing customers during construction. Nitro Development Authority President Hershel Facemyre said he plans to help develop pamphlets for businesses to give patrons, outlining detours they can take during the roadwork.

Facemyre said that although the bridge's shutdown will be a hassle, the current situation also hurts business because commercial traffic can't cross the bridge.

So far, highways officials don't expect to buy any homes at the bridge's ends, Ahmad said, though some residents at the meeting said they were still worried about the construction's impact on their property.

The state wants to do right-of-way work in the summer of 2011, Ahmad said. They would award the construction contract in September or October of that year.

Between the fall and spring, the contractor could fabricate steel while the bridge stays open to traffic, with construction starting in April 2012 and wrapping up by late fall of that year.

"We think we can do it in one construction season," he said, but emphasized that the state's schedule for the project is still tentative.

The state will offer the contractor financial incentives to finish on time -- and penalties for lateness, he said: "It's very, very important to us that this vital link will not be down for very long."

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