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Businesses braced for closure of Nitro-St. Albans bridge, eager for upgrades

by Paul Fallon, Daily Mail Staff



Brad Davis

Residents on both sides of the Dick Henderson Memorial Bridge agree it's in desperate need of renovations. Better known as the Nitro-St. Albans bridge, the span will close for replacement in 2012.



CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- While Western Kanawha business owners are split on what kind of an effect the closure of the Nitro-St. Albans bridge will have on their revenues, first responders in both cities already agree it will make their jobs harder.

West Virginia Department of Highways officials have said refurbishing the Dick Henderson Memorial Bridge connecting the two cities is a "top priority." But plans for the upgrade include closing the bridge from spring 2012 to late fall while construction is under way.

The Nitro and St. Albans fire departments have an automatic aid agreement for structure fires, meaning the two departments are both dispatched for such calls in either of the neighboring cities, St. Albans Fire Department Capt. C.E. Mitchell said.

Nitro firefighter Chad Mathes said it would take the St. Albans department longer to reach structure fires in Nitro.

"It could cause a little bit of a safety issue," Mathes said. "We'll have less manpower on the scene for structure fires."

Mathes said St. Albans typically sends three or four firefighters across the river to assist Nitro.

Mitchell pointed out that firefighters from both cities will still be able to offer each other assistance - it will just take longer for them to reach the blazes on the other side of the Kanawha River.

"It could take 10 or 15 minutes to get there instead of two," he said.

Mitchell does not believe it will cause safety problems, and instead referred to it as a "convenience issue," saying both departments have become accustomed to the automatic aid agreement.

"We know we're getting about three or four extra guys coming to a fire when we get a call," Mitchell said. "But we ran our departments for years without the automatic aid agreement."

Some of the business owners on the Nitro side of the Kanawha River believe the bridge closure will have a drastic affect on their revenues. Jeffrey Hart, 53, of Cross Lanes, owns Buck's Pizza along W.Va. 25 in Nitro. The business has been open about 15 years.

"It's definitely going to hurt us," Hart said.

He estimated that about two-thirds of his delivery business originated out of St. Albans and said it would take his drivers much longer to make it to the neighboring city. Hart is considering moving to a different location or expanding his delivery service into Dunbar to make up for the lost revenue.

"I'd have to hire another driver if I start delivering into Dunbar," he said. "It will definitely hurt my bottom line."

Mark McCallister manages Dwight's of St. Albans along U.S. 60. He noted that a lot of the restaurant's customers come across the Henderson Bridge from the Nitro side of the river.

"We've talked to a few of them and they told us that they would still be coming over to eat," he said. "But I am concerned about what it's going to do to business."

The 44-year-old Huntington resident said he was looking forward to seeing the bridge refurbished; adding that he believes it is dilapidated.

"I get nervous when I have to cross it," he said. "It's a rickety old thing."

Dennis Jeffrey owns Jeff's Appliances in Nitro, which has been next to W.Va. 25 since 1992.

"There's no doubt that the bridge needs to be refurbished," he said. "But it's going to have a tremendous impact on my business."

Jeffrey estimated that 15 percent of his customers crossed the bridge from the St. Albans side and will soon have to use the Dunbar-South Charleston Bridge or Interstate 64 to get to his store. This will add a considerable amount of time to their journey, he said.

"This is going to hurt everyone on the Nitro side of the river," he said.

But Jeffrey said he didn't see any other viable alternatives to the bridge closure and agreed the bridge is in dire need of being refurbished.

"It would be nice if they could keep this bridge open and build another one," he said.

State Department of Highways officials earlier told the Daily Mail that it would cost between \$80 million and \$180 million to build a new bridge, but replacing the older structure on existing piers would cost between \$30 million and \$35 million.

Rich Harper is owner of John's Cyclery in St. Albans. The South Charleston resident said he was delighted to hear the bridge would be refurbished.

"I think it's wonderful," he said. "I'm really glad they're doing it."

He didn't think the closure will hurt his business, where employees repair and sell bicycles.

"We serve a unique need," he said.

The bridge had been closed for about a year in the mid-1970s for repairs, Harper recalled. The owner of the store at that time said business did not drop off when the bridge was closed.

R.C. Stadler has owned Produce Junction along W.Va. 25 since 1971. The 80-year-old Nitro resident estimated the bridge closure could cost him about \$60,000 through the year. But he, too, had been through such a situation before when the bridge first closed for renovations.

"Most of our business comes from the St. Albans side of the river," he said. "I hate to see them shut the bridge down."

"But if it has to be done, it has to be done," Stadler added.

Although his business could suffer, Stadler said he would be able to make it for more than a year with the loss in revenue.

"We'll be able to make it for two years if we had to," he said. "But it hurts to the point where you can't expand."

Sean Lowe, 26, of St. Albans, is the senior sales associate at Appalachian Tire along U.S. 60. He does not believe the bridge closure will hurt the store's business.

"Our customers are loyal," he said. "They'll drive the extra mile to get here."

He said the bridge renovations were needed and well worth the inconvenience.

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