

Lanes on Route 3 bridge over Hackensack River restricted after cracks found in steel support

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Viorel Florescu / Staff photographer

The right-hand lane of the Route 3 bridge eastbound over the Hackensack River between East Rutherford and Secaucus was closed due to cracks in the bridge's support structure.

Pressure to replenish New Jersey's transportation fund grew yet again Wednesday afternoon, as the state Transportation Department partially closed the busy Route 3 eastbound bridge over the Hackensack River just before rush hour, citing new test results that revealed cracks in a steel beam that supports the span.

The move came as the department said 40 "structurally deficient" bridges in the state will be inspected within a week. And it came the day before Transportation Commissioner Jamie Fox was scheduled to hold a press conference highlighting the annual costs of New Jersey's aging infrastructure, which a new report estimates at \$2,000 per driver.

The closures, public appearances and stepped-up inspections were all part of an intensifying campaign to focus attention on what officials view as New Jersey's deteriorating infrastructure, as talks heat up about how to bail out the state fund that pays for road, bridge and rail repairs as well as other construction projects. The fund may be empty by July 1, Fox has warned.

The eastbound Route 3 span linking East Rutherford and Secaucus is used by about 75,000 motorists a day and serves as an important connection to the Lincoln Tunnel. About 4 p.m. Wednesday, officials closed

the right lane to all traffic and the left lane to heavy trucks. Repair work is expected to last about two weeks, said Steve Schapiro, a department spokesman.

The center two lanes of the four-lane bridge were unaffected, Schapiro said. The closings did not prompt any calls to police, a Secaucus officer said, and no traffic delays were detected by monitoring devices on the bridge.

Inspectors first noticed deteriorating conditions on the bridge in October, Schapiro said, prompting them to increase the frequency of inspections and to order a series of tests to gauge the bridge's safety. On Tuesday, the department received the results showing that cracks had developed in the beam, Schapiro said.

The bridge is one of 2,574 bridges maintained by the department, 293 of which are deemed "structurally deficient," Schapiro said.

That term is not as simple as it seems. Every bridge has a deck. Most bridges also have a substructure, which holds them up from below, and a superstructure, which supports them from above, Schapiro said. The label "structurally deficient" means that at least one of those pieces needs urgent repairs, usually within 30 days.

"Structurally deficient doesn't mean that it's unsafe," said Schapiro.

In extreme cases, deficient bridges that deteriorate further may be closed. The Amwell Road Bridge in Franklin in Sussex County, for example, was first closed to trucks over 14 tons because it couldn't handle the weight, but truck drivers ignored the warnings and kept using it, causing further deterioration that forced officials to close the bridge entirely last week, Schapiro said.

Bridge closures and the inspections were two elements of an apparent campaign led by Fox to ramp up pressure on New Jersey political leaders to fix the Transportation Trust Fund, which raises roughly \$1.2 billion a year, largely from motor-fuels taxes and highway tolls. The fund is supposed to pay for road, bridge and rail projects, but now, after years of state borrowing against

its revenues, nearly all of the money raised goes to pay its \$18.2 billion debt, leaving little for repair or construction work.

Christie discussed the looming funding crisis last week during his monthly "Ask the Governor" radio show, and Senate President Stephen Sweeney and Assembly Speaker Vincent Prieto have repeatedly said they support finding new revenue sources for the fund. A spokesman for Christie did not respond Wednesday to questions about transportation funding.

"It's his responsibility to make sure we in the Legislature are pressured" to fix the fund, Sen. Loretta Weinberg, D-Teaneck, said of Fox's moves. "I think the commissioner is doing the right thing."

Fox, a Democrat appointed by the Republican governor, has maintained a higher profile than most of Christie's Cabinet members. He has appeared at public events designed to raise awareness for the transportation funding issue and made the case directly to the media.

When Christie picked Fox as his second transportation commissioner back in September, Fox was working as a lobbyist after serving in a top administrative role at the Port Authority. Previously, Fox had served as transportation commissioner under Gov. James McGreevey, a fellow Democrat.

This morning, Fox is scheduled to attend back-to-back news conferences. First, he is expected to discuss a report on New Jersey's roads and bridges by TRIP, a non-profit group funded by insurance firms, construction companies and labor unions to study transportation issues.

The report concluded that poor roads in the state cost the average driver \$2,000 a year in extra maintenance, vehicle depreciation, time and fuel lost to traffic congestion, and financial losses from car crashes.

That event will be followed by an appearance near the Route 3 bridge where Fox is scheduled to talk about the partial closure and the need to raise money for the trust fund.