

Editorial: Welcome progress on Chatham Bridge

BY THE EDITORIAL PAGE STAFF OF THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Wednesday, May 25, 2016 12:00 am

Bolted-on plywood sheets and metal plates cover the worst sections of the crumbling concrete railings and sidewalks on the Chatham Bridge. Asphalt patches smooth out the potholes and rough joints on the deck.

For the past decade or so, the Virginia Department of Transportation has done piecemeal repairs on the 75-year-old Rappahannock River bridge that links southern Stafford County with downtown Fredericksburg. Such fixes don't project images of public safety.

Now there's a glimmer of hope that the four-lane State Route 3 Business span will be reconstructed—thanks to a new state-mandated bridge and pavement prioritization program. The Chatham Bridge is one of more than a half-dozen such projects in the Fredericksburg District that could be accelerated.

The Commonwealth Transportation Board will vote in June on allocating more than \$1 billion over six years for repairing bridges and pavement. We hope the CTB will see that the Chatham Bridge is among the first to be reconstructed.

Attention to the problem is overdue; it's one of 1,030 "structurally deficient" bridges across Virginia. Because of its condition, the Chatham Bridge has a weight restriction of 26 tons. Bridges on such key arteries are typically engineered to carry tractor-trailers of up to 40 tons.

It's time for VDOT to stop the cycle of inspection, patch and repair on critical connections. Lane closures have become more frequent on the Chatham Bridge as inspection crews have kept a closer eye on the structure. Meanwhile, a gaping hole opened up on the sidewalk more than a year ago. Today, a steel plate covers that opening, but other sections of sidewalk have crumbled, exposing rusted steel rebar. Concrete railings fracture when errant vehicles run into them.

As the region grows, so has usage of the Chatham Bridge, not only by vehicles but also by



State's new bridge and pavement program expected to help Fredericksburg area projects

Crumbling concrete and exposed rebar are visible on the Chatham Bridge over the Rappahannock River on Thursday, May 19, 2016. The Commonwealth Transportation Board is prioritizing new road projects with an emphasis on bridges.

pedestrians and bicyclists. Plans for the rebuilt bridge are expected to include pedestrian and bicycle lanes to tie into the partially built Belmont-to-Ferry Farm Trail and Fredericksburg's extensive trail system. This feature would improve public safety and boost the region's mobility for foot traffic and bicycles.

It's crucial to get going on the Chatham Bridge now because U.S. 1's Falmouth Bridge is not far behind in needing major work. It is listed as "functionally obsolete" because it wasn't designed to carry the amount of traffic it does these days.

VDOT needs to carefully schedule this bridge work because closures of two spans at the same time would be untenable for the region's transportation network.

Money is always an issue. The cost of rebuilding the Chatham Bridge has been estimated at \$50 million. The \$1 billion pledged to Virginia's "state of good repair" program is a start, but it would meet just a quarter of the estimated need for bridges and pavement rehabilitation projects over the next six years.

Though the Virginia General Assembly approved a \$6 billion transportation bill in 2013, revenue anticipated from taxes on online sales has not materialized because Congress failed to pass a cyber-tax measure.

And while lawmakers in Washington in December approved the first long-term highway bill since 2005, they failed to fully fund the five-year, \$305 billion initiative. In fact, almost a third of the bill's cost will be paid upfront by general tax revenue rather than transportation user fees like the federal gas tax—which hasn't been increased since 1993 and remains 18.4 cents per gallon. As is Congress' way, the transportation bill is largely paid for by accounting maneuvers and budget gimmicks.

Still, we welcome news that progress is being made to rebuild Virginia's deteriorating bridges and rehab rough roads. As Hap Connors, the Fredericksburg District representative on the transportation board, put it, "We do not have nearly enough money to take care of the enormous backlog, which will require us to find innovative and cost-effective solutions—and that is a good thing."

Transportation is a basic function of government; it keeps people and the economy moving. It is time for leaders to invest in our infrastructure.