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## 1st contract in Huey P. widening is awarded

Wednesday, February 15, 2006

By Rob Nelson

**West Bank bureau**

In the most significant step yet toward the long-discussed widening of the Huey P. Long Bridge, the state announced Tuesday that it has awarded an \$83 million contract to start work next month on the 70-year-old structure.

Massman Construction Co. of Kansas City, Mo., the lowest of three bidders, received the contract to start the first of four construction phases: the widening and strengthening of five piers that support that bridge.

The first phase will pose little disruption for drivers because the work is underneath the main bridge over the Mississippi River or on its banks, project spokeswoman Dana Newsome said.

The contract, which was awarded Friday, officially will start in March, but Massman could take as long as two more months to assemble manpower and equipment. That means work might not start in earnest until April or May, officials said.

"At least people can start to see that the project is progressing," she said.

The widening, which has been discussed since the early 1980s and now is expected to be completed in 2011, will expand the 1936 bridge from two notoriously narrow 9-foot lanes in each direction into three 11-foot lanes with two shoulders on each side.

The project also will transform the West Bank and East Jefferson approaches to the bridge into more traditional intersections with traffic signals.

## More contracts to come

The state is still negotiating with Massman about the construction timetable, though work on the piers is not expected to be completed until early 2008, Newsome said. That work eventually will overlap with other construction phases for which contracts are expected to be let later this year, she said.

A contract to modify the railroad trestle along the bridge should be let this spring, with construction to start soon thereafter. The widening of the main span will not begin until the spring or summer of 2007, about when the overhaul of the two approaches will start.

During the latter two phases, drivers can expect more delays, officials said.

Before Hurricane Katrina, the cost for the project was estimated at \$413 million, a figure that likely will rise sharply now that recovery efforts have put contractors and supplies in high demand.

In fact, the \$83 million price tag for the first phase represents a nearly 50 percent increase from the pre-Katrina estimate of \$56 million, Newsome said, adding that officials are still revising the overall projected cost.

All three bids for the first phase were higher than projected, Newsome said.

Further complicating the situation is a state requirement under its Transportation Infrastructure Model for Economic Development program requiring that 80 percent of workers on TIMED projects live in Louisiana.

The bridge widening is one of 16 projects in the \$4 billion TIMED program, which is financed through a fuel tax.

With thousands of potential workers still scattered across the country and local areas contending with housing crunches, Newsome said Massman will certainly face challenges in assembling a work force.

Massman officials could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

## Residents fear 'problems'

Though elected leaders and the business community have long touted the project as pivotal to the growth of the West Bank, the plans also have sparked years of protest from residents near the bridge.

The Nine Mile Point Citizens Bridge Committee has waged a battle against the widening, worried about the project's effects on traffic in the rural area as well as damage to their homes from the construction.

Committee President George Van Houten said Tuesday's announcement only fuels his worries. "The issues are still there," he said. "No one seems to want to address our situation out here. The construction is going to cause so many daily problems."

However, Lucien Gunter, the new executive director of the Jefferson Economic Development Commission, said the awarding of the contract will be cheered by business leaders.

"Any future growth possibilities in the parish really depend on making the West Bank even more accessible," he said. "This is going to be universally good news throughout the business community."

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