

71-year-old N.O. bridge to be revamped

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HARAHAN — The nearly 71-year-old Huey P. Long Bridge, built across the Mississippi River at a cost of \$13 million, is about to undergo a much-needed and long-awaited \$660 million face-lift, state and local officials and Long's great-grandson announced Thursday.

The five-year project will widen the 4.4-mile span's narrow lanes — from two 9-foot-wide lanes on each side with no shoulders to three 11-foot-wide lanes each way with 8-foot outside shoulders and 2-foot inside shoulders — and transform its approaches into modern interchanges.

Officials also say the project will speed development on Jefferson Parish's west bank and help accommodate an expected population boom on the west bank, which largely escaped Hurricane Katrina's flood waters that swamped part of the parish's east bank and devastated the east bank of neighboring Orleans Parish.

Gov. Kathleen Blanco said the state will save \$400 million by widening the bridge, which connects the east and west banks of Jefferson, rather than building a new structure from the ground up. State Department of Transportation and Development Secretary Johnny Bradberry said a new bridge would have cost more than \$1 billion.

“This is a huge project. It's going to take some time,” the governor cautioned during a groundbreaking ceremony on the river's east bank levee in the shadows of the bridge.

But Bradberry predicted the project will finish in 2011 ahead of schedule, despite the interruption caused by Katrina.

“This is not the time to accept delays and look for excuses,” he said. “We have an obligation to move forward.”

Jefferson Parish President Aaron Broussard referred to the bridge as the “umbilical cord” that links both banks of the parish.

The Transportation Infrastructure Model for Economic Development program, approved by state lawmakers and voters in 1989, is partly funding the bridge expansion. An indefinite 4-cent gasoline tax and more than \$800 million in state-issued bonds finance the 16-project TIMED program.

“This is 100 percent Louisiana money,” Bradberry said.

He turned to Russell Long Mosely, grandson of the late U.S. Sen. Russell B. Long and great-grandson of the late Gov. Huey P. Long, for which the bridge is named, and said, “I think your great-grandfather would be proud of what we're doing today.” Mosely served as master of ceremonies at Thursday's event.

The bridge widening project is a four-phase plan:

- The piers beneath the span will be widened, a process that begins today and is scheduled for completion in early 2008.
- The existing railroad track will be modified, beginning this summer and ending by the middle of next year.
- The existing road will be expanded, starting early next year and wrapping up by mid-2010.
- The approaches to the span will be reconfigured, beginning by the middle of next year and concluding by late 2011.

The project will cause 17 businesses, 10 on the east bank and seven on the west bank, to relocate. No residential displacements are planned.

Lane closings and lane shifts are planned and brief stoppages during nonpeak hours are expected, but officials say drivers won't face those changes until the middle of next year. During a four- to six-week-period next year, Bradberry said, traffic will be reduced to one lane on each side.

He stressed that all lanes will remain open in the event of another hurricane evacuation.

The Huey P. Long Bridge, the country's longest steel railroad bridge, opened in December 1935 — three months after the former populist governor was assassinated. It handles roughly 52,000 vehicles a day.

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