

\$6.7 million Pajaro Bridge project delayed

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WATSONVILLE — Officials and residents from both sides of the Pajaro River learned Thursday that the \$6.7 million project to replace the earthquake-damaged Pajaro Bridge is a long way from becoming reality due to added design problems and increased costs.

CalTrans officials did not say Thursday how long the delay might be. Bridge reconstruction was scheduled to begin in June and last 18 months, partly because construction time is limited by the state Department of Fish and Game to times of the year when it won't interrupt fish migration.

Pajaro Valley residents said they didn't understand why rebuilding the bridge, which connects the agricultural communities of Watsonville and Pajaro, is delayed when the Carmel Bridge is being rebuilt.

Nick Nichols, deputy public works director for Monterey County did say, however, that replacing the bridge is a "top priority."

In a status report in the Watsonville City Council chambers, Nichols said the design had been submitted for the review process to Caltrans but state engineers had given a preliminary indication that the project was "over-designed." The design was embellished to include railing and street lighting to be consistent with the architectural motif of Watsonville's Main Street beautification.

News of design delays wasn't what officials and residents wanted to hear. They came expecting to hear when the project would be put out to bid.

Watsonville Mayor Tony Campos said waiting 18 months for the completion of the bridge was unacceptable, and that's only if the bid is awarded sometime this summer. "People are upset," he added.

Karen Miller, Vice President of Clint Miller Farms, was very disappointed that the design process had moved so slowly. "I'm in shock," she said afterward. "I came here expecting to hear when the project was going out to bid."

Funding for the project will come from the Federal Highways Administration emergency replacement fund. Originally, construction costs were estimated at \$5 million to replace the bridge, but the latest estimate has jumped to \$6.7 million.

However, additional funding may be difficult to acquire, said Jerry Gibbs of Caltrans. "Most funds are

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expended five years out, and a \$5 million fund is set up. There's no guarantee any more money will be there."

Fresh in the minds of some is the Carmel bridge on Highway 1 over the Carmel River that was washed away during March storms. On Tuesday, Caltrans announced a new two-lane bridge will be completed by Memorial Day, just in time for the opening of the tourist season.

Monterey County Supervisor Tom Perkins said the two projects were like apples and oranges. The \$4.4 million Carmel Bridge bid, awarded to RGW Construction Inc. of Fremont, will come from Federal Emergency Management Agency funds because the bridge was destroyed by the ravaging flood waters. The Pajaro Bridge was damaged in the Loma Prieta earthquake, but funding will come from another federal agency.

Diane Young, a leader of Together in Pajaro, the grassroots organization created to better the Pajaro community, wondered why it had taken years for Caltrans' engineers to question the design. "We asked for input from them, now two years later, two groups are questioning the design." Nichols said the project must clear two levels in the Caltrans review process, one at the district level in San Luis Obispo, and the

other in Sacramento. "This had taken longer for the design process, and it's taken longer for the funding issue."

The next steps, Nichols said, are to determine what part of the project will be eligible for federal funding. Right now, Monterey County and the city of Watsonville are working to see what indeed is eligible.

They must also determine how much of the aesthetic and beautification portion of the bridge project will be funded, if any at all. The costs of bridge lights and railings that are embellished exceed the costs of standard ones by \$197,000. Regular railings are \$100,000, while embellished ones are \$200,000; regular lighting is \$28,000, while fancier fixtures are \$125,000.

In a related matter, Pajaro Valley officials and residents got welcome news that improvements to Highway 1 and the Salinas Road intersection, the major detour route while the bridge is rebuilt, were moving forward. Nevin Sams of Caltrans said the improvement plans had been presented to the Monterey County Planning Commission on March 15. A public hearing will be set, and Sams anticipated construction may start within two to three months. "We're looking to start as early as July for the first phase," said Monterey County Supervisor Tom Perkins.

The next meeting for discussion on the Pajaro River bridge replacement is May 11 at 2 p.m. in the Watsonville City Council chambers.