

# St. Augustine Record

## *Opinions*

### Bridge of Lions malfunctions unacceptable

#### Editorial

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The newly rehabilitated Bridge of Lions is failing St. Augustine's downtown traffic from U.S. 1 clear across to Anastasia Island and back.

The drawbridge mechanism is blamed for the majority of failures -- at least 70 total malfunctions -- since eight days after the bridge's March 17 opening, according to a log kept by bridge tenders. Skanska Inc., the general contractor for the \$82 million redo, says the complicated drawbridge system is at the root of the problems, but the company has not yet found the exact cause and cannot say when it will be fixed. A spokesman said Skanska has been working on this since March. The problems surfaced after the bridge's opening.

The bridge construction project took four years and a near-complete rebuild of the bridge that first opened in 1927. For years, the aging drawbridge mechanism failed routinely before the rehab. But no one expected this new drawbridge system to mimic the old system's worst moments. The major problem is that the two leaves fail to close completely. We're told by Laurie Sanderson, project spokeswoman for the Bridge of Lions contract, that this malfunction is the result of different components of the draw span operation failing at different times. This makes the problems more difficult to identify and correct. This is of special concern because the mechanism that operates the drawbridge is brand-new, designed especially for this bridge.

Although most of the reported malfunctions were to the drawbridge, some were to the navigation lights not working. Navigation lights are a safety issue and pose a completely different set of problems and questions.

We know new facilities have bugs to work out. And we're told that the mechanism worked well during testing, prior to its official opening. We're discouraged and distressed that our new, expensive bridge's drawspan doesn't work any better, and may be worse, than the one it replaced.

Fortunately, the city has an alternate route, the Mickler-O'Connell Bridge over State Road 312, south of downtown. It is out of the way but its reliability is better -- it's a high-rise bridge -- even though it moves traffic to and from the island and the city over the already over-extended U.S. 1 south. But it's better than standing in a long line, frustrated for who knows how much time, on either side of the Bridge of Lions.

Sanderson said the bridge team, led by the Florida Department of Transportation, is doing everything it can, and the team is frustrated, too.

We know downtown businesses and the St. Augustine City Commission also share that frustration. The bridge problems appear to disrupt commerce. Many drivers are avoiding the bridge, which means they are avoiding downtown. It's yet another reason for locals not to shop downtown.

The DOT says the team will be working on it till the solutions are found and repairs are completed. If the DOT can't move this project along in a timely fashion, then maybe the St. Augustine City Commission, Gov. Charlie Crist and State Rep. Bill Proctor, whose district includes downtown, should get involved. After all, the Legislature and Crist ultimately control the DOT's budget. The unreliable bridge is heading into a heavily laden summer tourist season for St. Augustine and likely even worse traffic jams than what we have had so far.