

St. Augustine Record

Bridge malfunctioned 70 times

Bridge of Lions problem complex, say engineers, with no date set for fixing it

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By TRACEY McMANUS

The Bridge of Lions drawbridge has malfunctioned at least 70 times since it opened 10 weeks ago, and engineers don't know what's wrong or when they will be able to fix it.

Most of the malfunctions have been the drawbridge failing to close completely, although there have been other malfunctions, such as the navigation lights not working.

Because of the delays, some drivers are getting frustrated.

"It's been quite interesting to have a first-hand view of this," said Diane Kissling, who works at Punch Jones Antiques near the Anastasia Island end of the bridge. "There's people getting out of cars, and tempers have gotten very frayed."

The bridge tenders started keeping a log eight days after the bridge opened on March 17 of each time the drawbridge got stuck open. Although engineers are investigating the issue, the cause of the malfunctions is still a mystery.

"A drawbridge is a fairly complicated piece of machinery," said Thomas J. Fulton, project executive with contracting firm Skanska. "There's a lot of mechanical components, electrical components and constructive components. If one piece of that doesn't do the right thing, then it can affect the entire operating system."

Fulton said project engineers are working to locate the root of the problems, but

there is a challenge when there are several parts of the infrastructure causing the delays. "It's a matter of looking into the problem and determining the cause of it and what changes can be made," he said.

Despite the problems, it would be rare for a project of this scale to not have technical problems in the first 60 to 90 days of use, Fulton said. Although engineers began the investigation in March, he could not give a timeline for when the problem may be solved.

The malfunctioning log shows the bridge causing as many as six delays in one day. But project spokeswoman Laurie Sanderson said she has heard mixed complaints from people dealing with lines of cars stalled in front of their businesses.

"If it's a malfunction I'll get several calls at once, and other days I'll get a few calls," Sanderson said. "Some (business owners) complain when traffic gets backed up, it's stressful. Others say '(drivers) sit there and look at us, and they decide to come in.'"

Real estate contractor Steve McLeod drives over the bridge every week for work and is often stuck waiting for the drawbridge to open while missing construction appointments.

"With this truck I can't turn around like these little cars can," he said from his GMC pickup Friday. "I've been here waiting an hour and a half before. I wish they'd fix it, because it's absolutely a problem."

Although the causes of the malfunctions are not known, it did not have to do with a rush to complete the project, Sanderson said. Some contractors incur fees from the state for building past projected end dates, but Skanska technically had until October to finish the work.

The Bridge of Lions project was given 1,825 days for construction, which was extended to 2,066 days for work time lost to rain, cold weather and changes in infrastructure plans.

Since the malfunctions began, people like Kissling have watched frustrated drivers vent in the street nearly every day.

From her store's rooftop patio, Kissling said she has seen reactions range from enraged to comical.

"I saw one guy get out of his car and do calisthenics," she said.

Others savor the delays as a way to pause and take in the view.

"I've lived on the coast so many years, and I've seen it happen from Miami to here," Chip Kirk said from his Jeep as he waited for the drawbridge to lower Friday. "They have to get the kinks out. But this is St. Augustine, and we try not to worry about that stuff."

Days the Bridge of Lions malfunctioned:*

March 25 -- Twice

March 26 -- Once

March 27 -- Four times

March 29 -- Twice

March 30 -- Four times

April 3 -- Six times

April 4 -- Once

April 6 -- Twice

April 7 -- Twice

April 10 -- Once

April 12 -- Four times

April 21 -- Once

April 23 -- Six times

May 3 -- Five times

May 4 -- Three times

May 5 -- Three times

May 6 -- Five times

May 7 -- Once

May 10 -- Twice

May 12 -- Twice

May 13 -- Three times

May 14 -- Twice

May 18 -- Twice

May 19 -- Twice

May 20 -- Once

May 21 -- Once

May 22 -- Once

May 23 -- Once

* The bridge opened on March 17; bridge tenders started the log on March 25. The bridge malfunctioned several times between May 19 and March 25, but records were not taken then on how many times the bridge malfunctioned and what the malfunction was.

<http://staugustine.com/news/local-news/2010-05-30/bridge-malfunctioned-70-times>