

Byrd Landing at Merrill to be closed

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The Byrd Landing boat launch at Merrill was closed to the public on Monday, October 29 and will be closed about a week, according to the George County Board of Supervisors.

The closure will allow construction contractors a place to move construction equipment and materials across the Pascagoula River to begin the rehabilitation project for the Merrill Bridge, according to Ken Flanagan, the County's communications director.

District Four road crews have placed warning signs and safety barriers at the site. County officials ask residents in the area to exercise caution because of the heavy equipment and bridge components.

Actual work on the \$1.2 million rehabilitation project will be in two phases. The first phase is placing additional piers and support structures under the bridge. That phase, awarded to Vice Construction, will begin immediately and take about three weeks, according to District Four Supervisor Larry Havard. The second phase includes replacement of some structural steel and support pieces. That contract was originally awarded to American Tank and Vessel, which had to withdraw its bid because of changes in steel pricing due to international trade negotiation tariffs.

Havard said the Board would advertise for bids for this steel work again next week. He was hopeful a suitable bid could be accepted and work would begin by the middle of December.

Weather, he cautioned, plays a big part in any project of this kind at this time of year.

The rehabilitation project, which will re-open the 90 year old bridge to light traffic such as automobiles and pickup trucks, has been a long time coming. The bridge was closed to all traffic in 2012, when a bridge inspection determined bolts holding the bridge together were rusting through and in danger of failure. Since that time the County has been trying to come up with money necessary to repair the bridge.

That amount has been a moving target. Several engineering studies have been conducted, and the County always came up short of the amount necessary to make the repairs. Mike Shirley with Holon Engineering told the supervisors he was confident the bridge could be made safe for light traffic for \$585,000. Local legislators managed to get a last minute legislative approval for the state to allocate \$750,000 for the project. The County let the project out for bid and got no bidders.

Supervisor Havard decided to break the project up in pieces with the County essentially acting as its own general contractor. Bids from Vice Construction and AT&V exceeded the \$750,000 budget. Unable to secure additional grants for the project, the Board of Supervisors approved to borrow \$500,000 late in the summer to finish paying for the project. That loan will be repaid \$100,000 per year plus interest, from future road and bridge fund allocations.

County officials have emphasized the importance of re-opening the bridge because the County, which is split by the Pascagoula River, has only two other bridges crossing the river. The bridge on Hwy. 26 is also an aged bridge, and if it was closed due to an accident, such as

happened to the Hwy. 57 Red Creek bridge near Vancleave or a bridge inspection, all traffic would have to be rerouted to the Hwy. 98 bridge in the northern part of the county.