

Historic Merrill Bridge officially reopens

By Royce Armstrong, GC Times

Released 6/13/19

Friday was a good day for the people of the Merrill community. After seven years, the Merrill Bridge was finally opened once more to traffic. Automobiles and light trucks traffic, that is.

“It is open to traffic now,” said Dist. Four supervisors Larry Havard, who has worked through the years of struggles and bureaucratic red tape to find funding for renovating the historic George County landmark. “The signage should be here this week.”

The signage is load limit signs, restriction traffic to essentially cars and pickup trucks. Additionally, steel beams restrict overhead clearance to only 12 feet. This safeguard keeps larger trucks and heavy equipment from attempting to cross the bridge, Havard said.

The 848-foot bridge was closed to all traffic in 2012, following a state bridge inspection which determined that pins or bolts securing the trusses had corroded to the point there were no longer safe. The single lane, Parker through-truss bridge was first opened to traffic in 1928. It is listed on the state registry of historic sites.

It took about \$1.2 million and roughly six months of work by vice Construction Company to make the bridge safe once more.

Vehicle traffic on the bridge may be short-lived. While working to find funding for repairs to the current bridge, George County Supervisors also put together a plan for a new, modern two-lane bridge. It was expected to take years to find funding for a new bridge, but the supervisors at least wanted the project “on the shelf” with then State Department of Transportation.

In January of this year the supervisors were surprised to learn \$8.5 million was approved through the Emergency Road and Bridge Fund to build a new Merrill Bridge, even as repairs were being made to the old bridge. Having the project “ready to go” is credited, at least in part, for the approval by MDOT.

The Merrill Bridge is considered critical to traffic flows in the county. It is one of only two bridges crossing the Pascagoula River in George County. The other is on Hwy. 26. Residents on the west side of the Pascagoula living near Merrill community are already often forced to drive some 20 or more miles out of their way to get to Lucedale or destinations east of the river. Without the Merrill Bridge, if something happened to temporarily close the Hwy. 26 bridge, George County residents would have to drive to either Jackson or Greene County to cross the river.

Bids for the new bridge may be let as early as this fall, according to Havard, with construction beginning soon after.

When the new bridge is completed, the old bridge will be retired to a much easier life. Because it is a historic landmark, it will not be destroyed.

“We have a lot of options,” Havard explained. “I would like to see it become part of a bicycle and hiking trail through the swamp. That is a beautiful area.”

The “swamp” includes thousands of acres of forested swamp land adjacent to the Pascagoula River owned by the Nature Conservancy.

A brief official re-opening ceremony is being planned for the old bridge.