



COURTESY OF THE VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Repairs to the historic one-lane plank bridge where Aden Road passes over railroad tracks in Nokesville are expected to take about a week.

PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY

After Inspection, Bridge Closed for Repairs

By MICHAEL LARIS
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Virginia engineers shut down a one-lane, wood plank bridge in Prince William County owned by Norfolk Southern Railway yesterday, saying the 125-year-old span had deteriorated rapidly since its last inspection, in July, and needed urgent repairs.

"The deck was bouncing up and down like piano keys," said Nicholas J. Roper, the Virginia Department of Transportation's chief bridge engineer for Northern Virginia. He inspected the Aden Road span in the Nokesville area Wednesday and decided to close it. "As the vehicle drove across it, you saw a rippling of the deck just like someone was tickling the keys."

Some of the "spike heads" securing wooden deck pieces to the bridge's iron structure had sheared off, and one plank had cracked through, Roper said. State engineers had called for repairs in 2003 and in 2006, but Norfolk Southern did not make the fixes, VDOT officials said.

A spokesman for the Norfolk-based freight carrier said the company expects to make the needed improvements within a week or so, unless the repairs are more extensive than the firm's engineers currently believe them to be.

"Safety is our highest concern, and we are not going to do anything to endanger the public. If there's a safety issue, we're certain-

ly going to address it. But I can't address the safety of this bridge specifically," spokesman Robin Chapman said. Work on the bridge has been hampered by the fact that it is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Chapman said. "With the fairly light usage that the bridge gets and the fact that it's on the historic register listing, it hasn't been high priority up until this point," he said.

The bridge, southwest of Manassas, carries about 1,750 vehicles a day. The railroad would prefer to replace it, with the state pitching in some of the money and taking over maintenance, Chapman said. But some state officials in Richmond have balked at the precedent that could set. Current law leaves responsibility for the bridge with the railroad, not the state.

Virginia officials said it was the first time since the Aug. 1 collapse of the Interstate 35W bridge in Minneapolis that they had shut down a bridge in Northern Virginia. Maryland's highway administration said it had not shut one of its bridges in years, and the last time it was notified that a Maryland county had done so was in July. A National Park Service bridge in Prince George's County was closed for several hours last week. District officials followed through with a preexisting plan to temporarily close a Whitehurst freeway ramp earlier this month.

The Minnesota bridge failure has directed attention to bridge safety across the nation.

Officials from the Maryland State Highway Administration said they are finishing up an extra round of inspections of bridges with a structure similar to the Minnesota span and have found nothing unusual. In Virginia, similar inspections are underway, and officials said some minor repairs have been made.

The timing of the Minnesota incident didn't drive yesterday's closure decision, VDOT officials said. The problems on the Nokesville span were caught during routine inspection, they said.

"Bridge inspection is our professional responsibility. We are tuned in to the importance of it all the time," Roper said, adding that the main difference is public attention on their decisions. "We are not paying any additional attention. We always pay attention. This one has been a concern for the Northern Virginia district for years. Sooner or later, without maintenance being performed, it was going to have to be closed."

Major repairs could cost as much as \$830,000, VDOT officials said; a deck replacement could run \$100,000.

Barbara Bain, a retired Prince William government clerk, has been driving over the bridge for 25 years to get to Manassas, and did so again Wednesday without a second thought.

"It didn't drive any different than it did the week before when I drove over it," Bain said. "It's always rattled a little bit with planks you know?"