



Downtown bridge to be closed to traffic for two months

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By Michael Barrett

Driving over the railroad tracks into downtown Gastonia will be a little more complicated for the next two months.

A plan to redesign how vehicle and pedestrian traffic crosses the Marietta Street bridge will result in the overpass being closed to southbound traffic from today through at least mid-December. Northbound vehicles traveling toward the Gaston County Courthouse will still be able to use the bridge, but traffic in the opposite direction will be affected between Long and Main avenues.

During construction, southbound vehicles and pedestrians may cross the railroad gully into downtown using the bridges on Broad and Chester streets.

The project stems from Gastonia having received an \$850,000 federal stimulus grant last year to renovate the Marietta Street bridge, which now has two lanes of travel for vehicles in either direction.

One of the southbound lanes across the railroad gully will be converted into a 10-foot-wide walkway, which will extend outward past Long Avenue and Franklin Boulevard. It will serve as the downtown portion of the Carolina Thread Trail — a network of regional greenways and bicycle paths linking 15 counties in the Charlotte region.

When the work is finished, the bridge will have one lane of travel for vehicles in either direction, with a shared center turn lane.

The city has overseen the design of the project, which was originally slated to be done by late 2009. But the delay was a trade-off for having the state Department of Transportation administer the stimulus funding, preventing city employees from being bogged down with paperwork, said Gastonia city engineer Rusty Bost.

Blythe Construction of Charlotte received the contract to complete the work with a low bid of \$678,400.

Daily traffic counts on the Marietta Street bridge are low enough that two vehicle travel lanes in either direction aren't needed, Bost said. The pedestrian walkway will use that space more efficiently, he said.

The walkway will be distinctive and aesthetically attractive, with a textured, red brick pattern, Bost said. Planter boxes will provide separation from nearby vehicles, while an aluminum safety fence with mortar columns will be installed on the west side, preventing objects from falling onto the tracks below.

The end result will be appealing, but the complexity of doing bridge work while ensuring trains can pass safely below will necessitate the two-month construction time, Bost said.

"It's not exactly as simple as pouring a concrete sidewalk in front of someone's house," he said.

<http://www.gastongazette.com/news/bridge-51340-traffic-downtown.html>