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New bridge to replace Cedar Flats Road detour

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A one-lane, 1-mile emergency detour near the Dec. 3 flood washout at Cedar Flats Road has got to go, Thurston County officials said this week.

After hearing complaints about traffic, public safety and disruption to property owners, county commissioners authorized the Thurston County Roads and Transportation Services Department to seek construction bids for two bridges to span the washed-out portion of Cedar Flats Road over Swift Creek. The area is a little more than 2 miles southwest of Olympia's city limits.

"Public safety is the biggest issue," said Gordie Kelsey of the roads department.

The bridges will replace the detour, which was built in less than two days at a cost of \$135,000 after debris jammed a 10-foot-wide culvert in the ravine under Cedar Flats Road. That caused rising floodwaters to infiltrate and erode the road embankment, leading to collapse.

"The county needs to be given a lot of credit for dealing with this in such a short period of time," said Joy Justis, who with her husband, Bill, is offering the county a right-of-way on their property for the new-bridge construction. "The best alternative at the time was the detour."

Temporary bridge

After a Feb. 8 bid opening, plans call for a one-lane temporary bridge to be built during a few weeks at a cost of \$150,000 to \$250,000, followed by a permanent bridge to be erected this summer at a cost of \$700,000 to \$1.4 million. Both projects are eligible for 75 percent reimbursement from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, said roads department director Lester Olson.

He told county commissioners that they would have to choose between keeping the \$135,000 detour in place until the permanent bridge is built or building the \$150,000 to \$250,000 one-lane temporary bridge alongside the permanent construction.

Commissioners, concerned about the mounting traffic problems with the detour, agreed with Olson's recommendation to build the temporary and permanent bridges.

Olson said drivers from the 90 families who use the emergency detour are getting increasingly impatient with the traffic signal at each end, which takes nine minutes to change colors.

A rear-end crash occurred when a driver drove through the red light and was met head-on by a line of cars coming in the other direction. The leader of the line of cars slammed on the brakes and was rear-ended.

"We're going to be putting more emphasis in enforcing the traffic laws," Olson told commissioners. On Friday, Olson signed a contract with the Thurston County Sheriff's Office to provide a minimum of three hours of overtime for patrol deputies at the Cedar Flats washout detour through Feb. 17. The contract will cost \$66 per hour, or \$2,772. Kelsey said drivers' impatience is dangerous because those at one end of the detour often can't see whether anyone's coming the other way.

Another problem is the disruption to property owners Steve and Wendy Schmidt, who allowed the county to build the detour through part of their driveway.

"It's always hard to imagine what the impact really is until you're there," Kelsey said Tuesday during a tour of the site.

The detour, which uses part of a state Department of Natural Resources forest road and the private property, was the quickest way to provide transportation for residents otherwise cut off, county officials said. Immediately after the flood and before the detour was in place, residents who needed to get in and out were transported by McLane Fire and Life Safety firefighters driving off-road vehicle shuttles.

"We had to take action in the most expeditious way we could," Kelsey said.

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