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Bridge closing cuts hiking, snowmobiling trail in half

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The Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail Bridge over the Pennsylvania Turnpike has been closed indefinitely.

The footbridge was closed shortly before Christmas when structural components of the 45-year-old span were found to be rusted. Since the bridge is closed, the 60-mile trail is cut in half. There is no detour around the bridge, which is about 10 miles west of Somerset.



Mike Mumau, operations manager of Laurel Hill, Kooser and Laurel Ridge state parks, said the deteriorated bridge poses safety hazards for hikers, cross-country skiers and snowmobilers and to motorists passing under the bridge on the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

“It had gotten to the point of deterioration that it made the closure an emergency,” he said. “It certainly served us well. But because of its location, it gets a salt plume from the turnpike four or five months a year.”

The rusted pieces of deteriorated metal will be removed on Thursday so debris doesn’t fall onto the turnpike. The turnpike will remain open, but there will be traffic control devices.

“There’s no detour” for trail users, Mumau said. “You have to turn back.”

When people make a park reservation online, there is a must-read section that explains the bridge closure. When people call the park office, they are told.

The trail’s average use is 80,000 to 100,000 people annually.

“A ton of people use the Laurel Highland trail,” Mumau said. “They love it. Some people take the same hikes every year. It’s very difficult for the snowmobilers — some like to go the entire trail. These are prime conditions. Our state parks and Forbes State Forest offer some of the best winter recreation there is. That’s why it is a top priority.”

The Department of Conservation and Natural Resources has been designing a new bridge for about a year and a half. It is being planned because that part of the turnpike is to be widened possibly in 2014 or 2015 and the bridge was going to have to be replaced then. New Enterprise will remove the damaged steel.

“We have no idea when it will reopen, but I don’t expect it to reopen this year,” Mumau said. “People are unhappy — it’s an emotional issue. Some are extremely upset: snowmobilers and through hikers.”

DCNR spokeswoman Christina Novak said the department had consultants look at the bridge, but the report is not back. There is no time frame when the bridge will be replaced. The other options are to shore up the existing bridge or to leave the trail blocked.

“We have to work through the issues, such as how to get at the bridge,” she said. “It’s bad timing because of snowmobile season. The bridge does connect two parts of the Laurel Highlands region.”

Ed Callahan, district forester for the Forbes District Office in Laughlintown, said snowmobilers like to ride the

60-mile trail and can't now. Cross-country skiers also like it. In the summer, mountain bikers and hikers use it.

"We groom 160 miles of snowmobile trail, and because of the weather, these folks don't have ideal conditions very often," he said. "We have an extensive trail system, but this is the only way to get across the turnpike. We hope to have the bridge rebuilt. This turned people's world upside down. It's a neat landmark. I hiked across it as a kid."

Petitions are circulating to have the bridge rebuilt, he said. Some mistakenly believe that it is turnpike property. The bridge belongs to DCNR.

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