

Closed bridge splits hiking trail

Span was only way for outdoors lovers to cross turnpike

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By Jon Schmitz, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The closing of a pedestrian/snowmobile bridge over the Pennsylvania Turnpike effectively cuts in half the 70-mile Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail, considered one of the nation's premier scenic trails.

The state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources closed the bridge in Somerset County last week after an inspection revealed structural deterioration.

Mike Mumau, manager of the Laurel Hill State Park complex, said he believes the bridge will have to be replaced but no firm timetable has been set.

"This is an emotional issue for snowmobilers, hikers, backpackers and cross-country skiers," he said.

"You have no idea," agreed Kerri Schott, of Belle Vernon, who uses the trail for snowmobiling, hiking and snowshoeing.

The trail stretches along the crest of Laurel Ridge from Ohiopyle to near Johnstown, passing through four counties and reaching elevations of nearly 3,000 feet.

The bridge closure, between mileposts 36 and 37, effectively cuts the trail in two because there is no other way to cross the turnpike, Mr. Mumau said.

"We're trying to find an alternate way around it," Ms. Schott said Thursday. "But we don't have one yet. It's a four-lane turnpike, so we don't have a lot of options."

Mr. Mumau said a department engineer was driving the turnpike recently and saw apparent deterioration of structural members on the underside of the span. An emergency inspection confirmed serious problems, and the bridge was immediately closed.

Gates on the trail near the bridge have been closed, and temporary barricades will be placed in several spots to alert trail users to the closure.

"Obviously, the safety of the folks who recreate on state park land and the safety of motorists on the turnpike is our top priority," Mr. Mumau said.

The department is awaiting the full inspection report before deciding on a course of action, but "it's probably going to have to be removed and replaced," Mr. Mumau said. The bridge was erected in the 1970s.

A new bridge would be wider and would have to be designed to accommodate future widening of the turnpike, he said. The area also is prone to high winds and plumes of salt kicked up from the highway for four to five months each year.

Ms. Schott said funding a replacement bridge should be a top priority for the state. She and other enthusiasts are gathering petition signatures in hopes of persuading the Legislature to move quickly.

"The closure of this bridge hurts hikers, snowmobilers, other outdoor enthusiasts who use the bridge and also local businesses. If you can't hike or snowmobile the entire section of trail that you want, you would

be more likely to travel somewhere else where the entire trail is open," she said.

Last weekend, after a heavy snowfall, parking lots that typically would have 200 trucks with trailers had only five, she said.

She said she is concerned that some users might try to cross the turnpike on foot and be hit by traffic.

Mr. Mumau urged users to contact the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources for information and advice on other park options.

"Obviously, for people who want the through-hiking experience, that's just not possible at this time," he said.

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