

# TRIBUNE-REVIEW

## Bridge closing cuts Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail in half

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Traversing the 70-mile Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail from one end to the other is impossible with the emergency closure of the bridge carrying the path over the Pennsylvania Turnpike, leaving hikers and snowmobilers in the lurch.

Mike Mumau, park operations manager of the Laurel Hill State Park complex, said the bridge was closed after an emergency inspection on Dec. 17.

Parts of the bridge's superstructure have rusted and deteriorated to the point the structural integrity is compromised, posing a danger to both those using the bridge and motorists beneath it.

The bridge, built in the 1970s, is in an area frequently battered by winter storms.

"It's exposed to about four or five months of the year of a salt plume in that area, so that contributed to the deterioration of the bridge," Mumau said.

On Thursday, workers are expected to remove six pieces of the bridge to prevent them from falling onto the turnpike below. But whether the bridge will be repaired or replaced and when that will happen awaits a consultant's report, Mumau said.

Mumau could not offer a time frame for the bridge to be reopened but said it is a priority.

The bridge, which is at about the midway point of the trail on Laurel Ridge, was set to be replaced in the next five years as part of a project to widen the turnpike in that area. Design work already had begun on the project when the bridge was closed.

Mumau said the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, which owns the bridge, is intent on making sure any replacement bridge would meet the turnpike's needs once it is widened.

"We're not waiting for (the widening project)," Mumau said. "It's a high priority for our department and it's an important link in the Laurel Highlands area. It basically is the one transportation corridor that runs the Laurel Highlands Ridge."

About 80,000 to 100,000 people use the trail every year, some as day hikers and others biking or walking the entire length from Ohiopyle to Seward. That figure does not include snowmobilers, who ride on trails in the surrounding state forest and use the bridge to get from one area to the other.

Belle Vernon resident Kerri Schott, president of the Laurel Highlands Snowmobile Club, said her organization and two others for snowmobile enthusiasts in the Laurel Highlands have been contacting state officials and legislators to make sure the bridge is not forgotten.

About 640 people have signed an online petition organized by the clubs.

The bridge closure has cut snowmobile riders from about half of the trail system. Schott worries that the longer the bridge is closed, the more people will go to other areas to ride snowmobiles. She's already noticed the trails are emptier than usual this winter.

"The clubs are going to lose memberships, and local businesses are going to lose money," Schott said. "I'd like to see a new bridge up and in place before our next riding season."

The closure also has organizers of the Laurel Highlands Ultra working to figure out alternatives before June, when a 31-year-old race along the trail is scheduled.

"We will still be doing the race, but with the closure we'll have to come up with a different course — either detour around it or do a back and out on one portion of the trail," said race director Rick Freeman.

The Ultra has two races — an individual and a team relay — that travel the entire trail. A third, 50K race will not be impacted.

This year, runners will either start and end at Ohiopyle or detour onto park and public roads to get around the bridge. The second option would add about six miles to the race and require permits and police to protect runners from vehicles.

Freeman said it is important to keep the race going because it is believed to be the second oldest such race still in existence.

"We will have our plan in place so we won't have to cancel the race," Freeman said. "We want to see it keep going and keep our streak alive, too."

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