

Foresthill bridge retrofit will boost quake safety, create jobs

Darrell Smith, Sacramento Bee, 1-15-10

Placer County is preparing for a massive two-year, \$71 million project to seismically retrofit the Foresthill Road Bridge in Auburn.

Work is expected to begin in summer. An informational meeting for potential bidders will be held Feb. 10 in Auburn.

The project, to be completed in fall 2012, could be significant in a region where unemployment is above 12 percent and the building trades have been hard hit.

"We're talking about a \$70 million to \$80 million project, with labor and materials. This is a substantial project, especially for the county," said Ken Grehm, Placer County's public works director.

Placer County owns and maintains the bridge.

Much of the project's funding – about \$60 million – will come from federal bridge rehabilitation funds, with the remainder from local transportation funds and state seismic retrofit bonds, he said.

"This will have a very positive impact on the community and the local trades. For a lot of trades, this is going to be significant," said Sam Hassoun, director of engineering at the Associated General Contractors of California in West Sacramento.

"Many people don't realize that it's not just the actual construction jobs (that will benefit)," he said. "They need to eat lunch, buy clothes. The ripple effect is huge."

Plans to improve the 2,428-foot-long span have been in the works for much of the past decade, Grehm said. The state Transportation Department approved funding in 2003.

"We needed to analyze the bridge, decide what to do, find out what are the problems with the bridge," he said.

The project's roots stem from the aftermath of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake that devastated the Bay Area and collapsed the Cypress Freeway and a portion of the Oakland-San Francisco Bay Bridge.

Forty-two motorists died in the Cypress collapse. Another driver died when a section of the Bay Bridge failed.

After the Bay Area quake, state transportation officials examined California bridges' ability to withstand an earthquake. The Foresthill Bridge was identified in 2000 as vulnerable to earthquakes, Grehm said.

Grehm said the main goals will be to beef up connections along the span, build abutments to absorb some of the energy of a quake and install hinges that could move with the bridge during a temblor.

The work won't be easy.

The metal span, designed to cross a reservoir had the Auburn dam been built, soars 700 feet above the north fork of the American River and over steep canyons and rugged terrain. Access is very difficult.

The bridge will also get a new coat of paint. That, too, will be a feat.

The bridge, built in 1972, is coated with lead-based paints.

Removing the old coat and applying the new without polluting the American River and canyons below will mean sections of the bridge will have to be tented off to prevent contamination from lead and other materials.

All of this without closing the bridge to traffic. Placer County plans to keep the crossing open. "It's really the only way in" for Foresthill residents, Grehm said.

Information on the project and the Feb. 10 meeting can be seen at www.placer.ca.gov/Departments/Works/ForesthillBridge.aspx.