

CAN BRIDGE HANDLE TRAFFIC GROWTH?

■ Group frets about future impact on Yale Street over bayou

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News that the Yale Street bridge over White Oak Bayou is no longer safe for heavy trucks has renewed scrutiny of the traffic impact to come from new retail development and from feeder roads being built along Interstate 10 between Washington Avenue and Taylor Street.

The \$49 million highway project is rebuilding existing I-10 feeder roads and adding bridges over White Oak Bayou west of Yale Street. New ramps between Patterson and Yale will improve access to Yale and Heights Boulevard.

Paid for with federal stimulus funds, the 32-month project began in April 2010 and is about 60 percent complete.

The Texas Department of Transportation on Nov. 8 lowered weight limits for the Yale Street bridge.

The previous rating allowed a maximum weight load of 40,000 pounds and 21,000 pounds for tandem-axle vehicles. The new rating is 8,000 pounds per single axle and 10,000 pounds for tandem axle. For comparison, federal interstate standards set a limit of 20,000 pounds for single-axle and 34,000 pounds for tandem-axle ve-

hicles.

TxDOT spokesman Danny Perez said the downgrade came after load-rating calculations were performed using original construction drawings of the bridge.

About 10 Houston school district buses were rerouted away from the bridge earlier this year based on warnings about its safety by a local advocacy group, Responsible Urban Development for Houston.

Alvin Wright, a spokesman for Houston's Public Works and Engineering Department, said the lower load limits will extend the life of the bridge until the city can identify a way to replace it.

New load-limit signs are in place on the bridge, and Houston Police Department is expected to aid enforcement of the new rating, he said.

In addition, Metropolitan Transit Authority, Houston Fire Department and other agencies have been notified.

The group identified the 1931 concrete bridge as a weak link in plans for redevelopment south of I-10, including a proposed development by Ainbinder Heights LLC that includes a Wal-Mart store, as well as other retail sites on Koehler Street at Yale.

RUDH is suing the city and Ainbinder Heights over an economic development agreement used to improve public infrastructure around the development. Houston City Coun-

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cil approved the agreement in September 2010.

In a press release, RUDH said the downgrade of the bridge essentially prohibits nearly every type of commercial truck, including combination trucks, buses, delivery trucks and large panel vans, from safely passing over the bridge.

Use of Heights Boulevard as an alternate has those trucks crossing pedestrian trails and bike lanes, the press release said. But what's not addressed is the added traffic expected to use Yale Street after the new feeder roads open, said Jeff Jackson, an attorney and RUDH board member.

A traffic impact analysis

done by Ainbinder showed considerable traffic congestion on Yale, where traffic signals would have cars idling on both sides of the bridge, all the way across, during peak hours, Jackson said. Neither the city nor TxDOT is taking enough responsibility to determine if the bridge is structurally able to handle those impacts, Jackson said.