

Causeway bridge problems flagged in April

Engineering firm alerted county to issues



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Rig mat decking has been placed on the causeway between Long Point and Port Rowan as a temporary repair for a wooden bridge that is beginning to fail. *MONTÉ SONNENBERG / SIMCOE REFORMER*

Norfolk County has set the record straight on problems with a bridge on the Long Point Causeway.

In public statements, Norfolk staff have suggested that the Simcoe engineering firm G. Douglas Vallee Ltd. inspected the bridge near George Lane in April and found nothing wrong with it.

In fact, engineers with Vallee Ltd. noted several defects and flagged the bridge for re-inspection.

"This has been eating at my conscience," Mayor Charlie Luke said Monday. "I was really struggling with the fact that a reputable engineer who has done good work for the county had this doubt cast on him.

"The public needs to know action was taken to get to the bottom of this. It has to be made right."

May 15, Norfolk council was surprised to learn that the deck on the causeway bridge was deteriorating rapidly and that emergency traffic measures were needed to prevent it from failing entirely.

A Norfolk pothole-repair crew brought the situation to the attention of county management May 14. The news couldn't have come at a worse time. The causeway is the only road into Long Point and the Victoria Day holiday weekend – with its influx of cottagers – was set to begin May 18.

Many were surprised to hear that an engineering firm responsible for inspecting county bridges allegedly missed significant signs of deterioration. Erroneous statements about the April inspection were shared with both council and the public.

"The Long Point Causeway Bridge was inspected by G. Douglas Vallee Limited of Simcoe in April, 2018," a county news release said May 17.

"At that time no immediate structural compromise or deficiencies were found."

Norfolk CAO David Cribbs investigated after questions were raised about this chain of events. In a recent memorandum to council, Cribbs noted that an engineering inspection in 2016 identified the need for future repairs to the causeway bridge.

"The bridge was also inspected in April of 2018," the memo adds. "This time more serious concerns were identified, although not so serious that any immediate closure, lane reduction or weight limit was felt to be necessary at the time of inspection.

"The engineering consultant – G. Douglas Vallee Limited – had plans to return later in the year to conduct a more thorough inspection.

"The structural problems on the southbound lanes developed after the initial inspection but prior to the more thorough inspection being conducted.

"Accordingly, the bridge was inspected and did not `fail' its initial inspection. However, it was inaccurate for the county to imply that the bridge had been given a clean bill of health."

On Monday, John Vallee of G. Douglas Vallee Ltd. said Cribbs' memo was sufficient and that there was nothing to add.

"What the memo says is very accurate," Vallee said. "There is really no need to say more than that."

Lee Robinson was Norfolk's general manager of public works when the causeway problem arose. She left the county's employ near the end of June, citing family reasons.

On Monday, Mayor Luke said Robinson's departure is unrelated to the causeway bridge situation.

Norfolk's immediate response was to restrict traffic on the bridge to a single lane, impose a 30-kilometre-per-hour speed limit, and forbid vehicles heavier than 11 tonnes from crossing the structure.

This created complications in Long Point for the collection of garbage, the delivery of fuel, firefighting, the delivery of water, and the collection of waste from holding tanks.

As well, retailers in Long Point had to transfer inventory from delivery trucks into pickup trucks in Port Rowan before crossing the bridge into the resort community.

Norfolk has since placed a temporary deck over the failing structure, which crosses a channel linking Long Point Bay with the Big Creek Marsh. Two-way traffic has been restored and the weight restriction has been lifted. However, the reduced speed limit remains in effect.

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