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Window of opportunity missed for fast permanent restoration

By Sophie Braccini



The sinkhole site during construction Photo Andy Scheck

The work for restoring the sinkhole finally started on Rheem Boulevard, with the consequence of closing that arterial until October. Public Works Director Edric Kwan explains that the town had to wait over a year for the Federal Highway Administration - through the California Department of Transportation - to validate the restoration plan. He adds that the FHWA changed its permanent restoration process for the 2016-17 winter damages in California, something Orinda was able to benefit from, but that came too late for the Moraga sinkhole and ended too early for the Canyon bridge.

There is a difference between permanent restoration and emergency reopening. Emergency reopening funding gets expedited and approved within a few months. It has limitations, too: usually the agency funds only the reopening of one lane of traffic. As soon as a drive-through is restored, the situation is no longer an emergency and the approval process for the permanent

restoration of the damaged infrastructure takes a much longer time. This is what happened to the Moraga sinkhole: the minute traffic was restored, it was not an emergency reopening.

The winter of 2016-17 was so detrimental to California's infrastructure that the FHWA decided in March of last year that disasters declared between December of 2016 and February of 2017 would benefit from an emergency treatment of their repairs even for permanent restoration of the damaged infrastructure. This meant that public work agencies were not limited to reopening just one lane of traffic and could completely restore their infrastructure with an expedited approval process. It was a year too late for the Moraga sinkhole.

Kwan says that this program allowed Minor Road in Orinda to be completely repaired relatively quickly, and not subjected to the just-one-lane-restored rule that it would otherwise have had to apply in order to get emergency treatment. Public Works Director Larry Theis added that Orinda's incident did happen during a period eligible for rapid complete restoration, but that the city still had to drive a hard bargain with the administration since the opening of a detour could have been considered as a way to end the emergency nature of the incident.

Caltrans Robert Haus confirmed that his agency sent the information of the policy change along to all agencies that had repair projects dealing with damage suffered in the winter storms of 2016-17. The Canyon Bridge could not benefit from this program since it happened later, in the spring of 2017. In order to now fall under the emergency reopening procedure, Moraga can only open one lane of traffic at the bridge.

Bridge and sinkhole update

Public Works Director Edric Kwan confirmed that the Federal Highway Administration approved the emergency replacement of the Canyon Bridge with a one-lane temporary connection. This means that Moraga should be completely reimbursed from the expense it will incur. The estimated amount approved by the FHWA is \$2.06 million. Meanwhile, the sinkhole is being excavated so the old culvert can be extracted and then replaced - all according to plan, said Kwan.

The old Canyon Bridge needs to be removed first, the director explained, because the one-lane emergency replacement bridge will be set in its place. This will give enough space for the town to start the construction of a new permanent bridge, once that project is approved for funding.

As the town staff prepares the bid documents for the construction of the new bridge abutments and installation of a prefabricated replacement bridge, utilities are relocating lines that would interfere with the demolition and/or construction. As soon as this is complete, demolition will start. Kwan expects the one-lane bridge to be operational by the end of October.

The culvert under Rheem Boulevard should be repaired and the intersection reconstructed at around the same time. The contractor is removing the failed culvert and is also constructing a bypass for the sewage going through the hole.

Kwan added that the town would conduct more outreach using signage to support the retail establishments

located around the road-closure area and remind the community that they are all open for business.

- By Sophie Braccini

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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