

Highway 171 bridge reopens just in time for Carl Junction Bluegrass Festival

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CARL JUNCTION, Mo. — The Highway 171 bridge over Center Creek reopened to traffic on Thursday afternoon, the Missouri Department of Transportation announced.

The timing couldn't have been better for Gary Stubblefield, executive director of the Carl Junction Area Chamber of Commerce. Like many in the city, he is busy preparing for Saturday's annual bluegrass festival, which draws an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 visitors to Center Creek Park each year.

"There are a lot of ways in and out of Carl Junction, but that's the main artery, and we really need that," Stubblefield said of Highway 171. "After having the bridge closed all these months, it's had an impact — there's no denying it — on business. Being able to show off Carl Junction with the festival and letting everyone know we're back — we needed this something terrible."

The old bridge was built in 1955 and had increasingly required costly maintenance, MoDOT officials previously told the Globe. The main reason for its reconstruction was its age, not any glaring safety concerns or damage, they said.

The bridge was closed to traffic on May 30 for repair work that included replacement and widening. The contractor on the project was Capital Paving & Construction, of Jefferson City. The replacement cost \$2.65 million.

The project finished 10 days ahead of schedule, and that's in large part due to a plea that Stubblefield made to work crews to push for the bridge to be open in time for the bluegrass festival, said Greg Chapman, Joplin resident engineer for MoDOT.

"It wasn't presented as a challenge, but we took it as a challenge," Chapman said. "I got with the contractor and said, 'Hey, guys, let's try to make this happen for them.'"

Chapman said good weather and a strong work ethic from the contractor also helped speed the project along.

"Overall, they were a great contractor to work with; they partnered well with us," he said. "They worked extremely hard and worked a lot of weekends to try to get this project done on time."

Steve Lawver, city administrator for Carl Junction, burst into cheers when asked for comment on the reopened bridge.

"It makes it easy to get back into town," he said, adding that city officials noticed a decreased amount of traffic on Pennell Street, Carl Junction's primary road, during the closure of the bridge.

Phil Cook, superintendent of Carl Junction schools, said the school district will try to keep its bus routes as close as possible to the schedule they have followed since the bridge closed. But as a resident of the city, he said he's excited to see such a "wonderful bridge" open to traffic.

"Thank you to MoDOT for the new bridge; we needed it bad," he said. "And to (the contractor) — job well-done, as far as timing. ... It's just a good day."