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PennDOT schedule not sunk

Agency says new sinkhole won't force Route 33 to close for longer time.

Friday, April 23, 2004

By **ALYSSA YOUNG**
The Express-Times

PALMER TWP. -- The sinkhole that surfaced Wednesday evening where workers are replacing a northbound Route 33 bridge will not change the project's design or timeline, Pennsylvania Department of Transportation spokesman Ronald Young Jr. said Thursday.

About 6 p.m. Wednesday, a 15-foot-wide, 60-foot-deep hole opened on the northern bank of the Bushkill Creek and swallowed a trash receptacle filled with dirt and stones, Young said.

The sinkhole is between the remnants of a pier that supported the dismantled bridge spanning the stream and the new northern abutment that will hold up its replacement.

PennDOT officials and engineers on Thursday consulted with experts from the state Department of Environmental Protection and the Federal Highway Administration to develop a solution for Wednesday's sinkhole.

DEP spokesman Karl Lasher said mining office employees who inspected the hole observed indications that it was not a direct result of nearby quarry operations.

Quarry dewatering is one of several factors that can contribute to the creation of sinkholes.

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PennDOT removed the 34-year-old bridge after a sinkhole began swallowing its southern pier Jan. 24 and damaged the bridge beams under the road.

Workers on Thursday had stabilized the newest sinkhole and used a hose to rinse it out so they could find its throat and fill it with stone. The repair is expected to take one or two days, Young said.

Then workers will resume installing the foundation that will tie the new bridge's northern concrete abutment to solid rock 250 feet below ground. Meanwhile, other workers are installing the southern bridge abutment's foundation.

The foundations are designed to protect the bridge from future sinkhole damage.

The original structure was not tied to rock. It stood on a foundation of compacted soil that shifted into the fatal sinkhole.

When the northbound bridge foundation is complete, PennDOT plans to underpin the southbound bridge because it was built the same way.

The latest development reminds workers at the site to pay close attention to conditions in the earth around them and move away if they notice unusual cracks or movement, Young said.

During the past three years, about 90 ground faults have surfaced along a 1.5-mile stretch of the Bushkill Creek, according to people who live there.

Lasher said the DEP, PennDOT and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are meeting to prioritize existing sinkholes based on their need for immediate remediation.

The DEP also is reviewing whether it can improve its internal procedures for dealing with sinkholes, he said, adding that it is too soon to tell what changes the agency might make.

Reporter Alyssa Young can be reached at 610-863-3841 or by e-mail at ayoung@express-times.com.

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