

OVERPASS PROBLEMS IN SANDUSKY COUNTY

Turnpike to pay some costs in rift over repairs

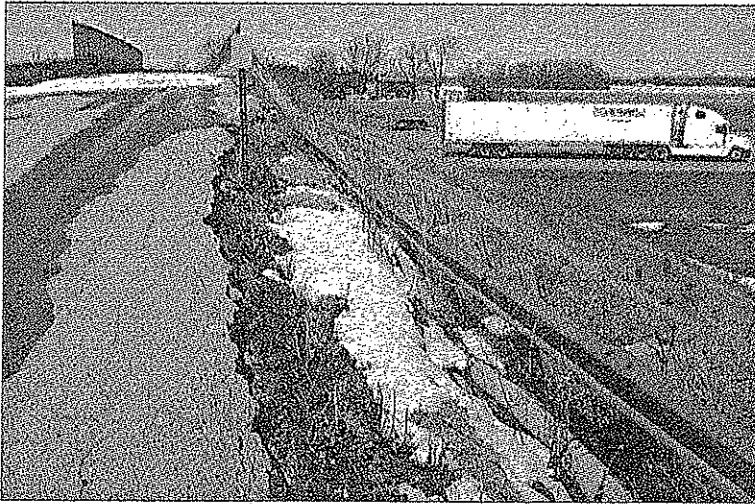
By DAVID PATCH
BLADE STAFF WRITER

The Ohio Turnpike has agreed to pay for an engineering survey and may also cover costs of repairing a collapsing embankment on a township road in Sandusky County that was closed near its bridge over the toll road in 2007.

The agency's chief executive, however, has not accepted responsibility for 10 similarly deteriorating roads nearby.

In a Feb. 23 letter to Sandusky County Engineer James Moyer, turnpike Executive Director L. George Distel pledged to hire an engineering firm to test soil samples from around the Jacobs Road overpass in Riley Township and to prepare construction plans and estimates.

Repair costs would be borne by the turnpike, "conditioned on ap-



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Jacobs Road in Sandusky County's Riley Township has been closed at this overpass since 2007. The embankment is crumbling.

proval by the OTC Board of Commissioners," Mr. Distel wrote.

But the letter specifies that turnpike-funded repairs for Jacobs would be "nonprecedent-setting" because the slope failures there appeared five years after the turnpike did embankment work when it replaced a bridge in 2000.

Mr. Distel said the turnpike's "request for proposals" for engineering firms to do the soil tests

and other work will include an option for surveying 10 other problem embankments, but additional testing will depend on the availability of nonturnpike funding.

Mr. Moyer said the Jacobs promise is a start, and he's confident the turnpike commission will pay for the repairs, which he said have been estimated at \$400,000.

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"I'm grateful that they're at least doing that," the county engineer said yesterday. "And it'll be helpful to have the soil borings, so we really know what's going on" beneath the roadway.

But Mr. Moyer also hopes some sort of funding can be arranged to pay for testing the embankments at 10 other problem overpasses in Riley and Sandusky townships, including three county roads, whose conditions have become visibly worse just this winter.

Lauren Hakos, a turnpike spokesman, said that "it could be later this summer" that work on the Jacobs embankment begins, but a formal cost estimate hasn't been prepared and construction funding remains to be identified.

"They will try to do it this construction season, which is very exciting for the people up there," said state Sen. Karen Gillmor (R., Tiffin), who, along with State Rep. Jeff Wagner (R., Sycamore), sat in on a recent meeting of county and turnpike officials regarding the problem.

Hundreds of local roads cross the Ohio Turnpike along its 241-mile route across northern Ohio, and many of them — especially in the northwest Ohio flatlands — require embankments to ramp up on either side of their bridges.

But while turnpike construction in the early 1950s included building those embankments, toll-road officials have maintained for years that the agreements under which they were built made the local jurisdictions responsible for their upkeep, with the turnpike responsible only for the bridges themselves.

Local and county officials counter that without the bridges, the embankments wouldn't exist, so the turnpike should maintain the earthworks as well as the bridge structures.

An opinion in 1953 by C. William O'Neill, then Ohio's attorney general, is vague enough that both sides cite it for support.

Mr. O'Neill found that maintaining the pavement of local roads crossing the

turnpike is a local responsibility, "but the structure by which such paved surface is supported is a part of [the turnpike] and its maintenance and repair is the responsibility of the turnpike commission."

Mr. Moyer has said the "structure" logically includes the embankments, which the turnpike denies.

The issue has arisen in Sandusky County because of the slope failures, which have not occurred elsewhere along the toll road. Besides Jacobs, other roads with slope problems at turnpike bridges are Carley, Yorktown, Shiets, Fangboner, Four Mile House, Gibbs, Township Line, Garbler, Werth, and Shannon.

Representative Wagner and Senator Gillmor both pledged to explore funding sources for studies and repairs beyond the Jacobs work.

"There could be money from the state, there could be from other places," Senator Gillmor said.

Mr. Wagner, who is sponsoring a bill that would make the turnpike explicitly responsible for the embankments' capital maintenance, said doing soil borings at the other bridges is "not big money."

Mr. Moyer and the Sandusky County commissioners, meanwhile, co-signed a letter to Gov. Ted Strickland asking him to meet with them to discuss the failing embankments.

"The potential of closing adjacent roads is a distinct possibility," they wrote. "This will compound the increased response time by emergency services."

Clyde Fire Chief Paul H. Fiser, whose fire district includes Riley Township, said the Jacobs closing three years ago lengthened response time to some addresses north of the turnpike by two minutes.

"The failing overpasses are becoming hazards to the local traveling public and when closed, as needed, become a hazard to the neighboring residents because emergency services are affected," Chief Fiser wrote in an Oct. 9 letter to the turnpike, co-signed by the Sandusky Township and Townsend fire chiefs.

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