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ELKHART COUNTY BRIDGE REPLACEMENTS LOOMING

Elkhart County's bridges are in better shape than most county bridges in the state, but replacement needs are looming as indicated in the final bridge inspection report prepared by United Consulting of Indianapolis. About 8% of the bridges in the county have a weight limit compared with 12% statewide. A weight limit indicates that a bridge is in fair to poor condition and that it will need work soon. Half of the bridges with a weight limit are box beam type structures which were popular in the 1960s and 1970s. A majority of the county's bridges are of this type and there is concern that more of these will require work in the next 20 years.

These findings are the result of a countywide bridge inspection program. The inspection of 170 county bridges was completed under contracts with the Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT) and United Consulting. These bridges include any structure with a length over 20 feet and located on a county road or city street. The inspection of these bridges is done every 2 years. Federal funds administered by INDOT are used to pay 80% of the inspection cost. County funds are used to pay the remaining 20%. Bridges maintained by INDOT were not included in the inspections.

United Consulting indicated in their final report that Elkhart County is in full compliance with State and Federal requirements for bridge inspections. The inspections include an on-site review of each bridge. About 150 pieces of information about a bridge are recorded. United Consulting prepares a summary of the maintenance needs that the county bridge maintenance crew uses to prioritize their efforts. They also prepare a list of bridges needing more substantial work such as rehabilitation or replacement. The county uses this information in the development of the 10-year capital improvement plan.

Fourteen of the county's 170 bridges, or about 8%, have a weight limit which means the weight of a truck allowed to use the bridge is below the legal maximum limit. This is normally due to deterioration of the bridge. Four of the bridges with a weight limit are scheduled to be either repaired or replaced in the next two years. Other bridges will be added to the 10-year capital improvement plan as funding becomes available.

United Consulting provided a comparison of the county's bridges with all other county bridges in the state. They found that the average county has 142 bridges or 28 less than Elkhart County, the average age of a bridge including Elkhart County is 42 years, and 12% of the average county's bridges have a weight limit which is 4% more than Elkhart County. They indicated that, in general, Elkhart County is doing a better job in maintaining its bridges than the average county in the state.

The next bridge inspections will be done in 2014. Additional information on the bridge inspection program can be obtained from Tom Rushlow at the Elkhart County Highway Department.