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Officials fear bridge work will hurt Passage

By Mike Pare Staff Writer

Chattanooga officials are worrying about the popular Cherokee memorial next to the Market Street Bridge after a firm working on the span damaged a new riverfront canoe ramp.

Dan Kral, the city's parks director, said the elements at the \$2 million Passage aren't as easy to replace as the ramp.

"We have been in contact with the Tennessee Department of Transportation and said this is a concern," he said.

City Council Chairwoman Sally Robinson said steps will be taken to protect The Passage, which features seven 350-pound discs designed by Cherokee artists that depict events significant to the tribe.

"We'll make sure our inspectors are there," she said.

As workers recently tore down the concrete bridge approach on the North Shore, a large piece of debris fell on the ramp, Mr. Kral said.

He said the bridge company, Mountain States Contractors, determined it was cheaper to damage and later fix the ramp than to protect it.

The ramp, built along with The Passage this year as part of the 21st Century Waterfront Project, had "fairly significant damage" and isn't usable until repaired, Mr. Kral said.

Mountain States of Durham, N.C., was the low bidder on the bridge project. A TDOT official said it is providing "extreme oversight" because of the connections between Mountain States and Jones Bros. Inc. of Lebanon, Tenn., and the historic nature of the span.

Jones Bros. was criticized after the company took almost two years longer than anticipated to finish the widening of state Highway 153. Mountain States' chief manager Tom Sulivan, who said he used to work for Jones Bros., has noted the firm hired "a fair amount of ex-Jones Bros. employees."

However, the contractor and TDOT said they will protect The Passage, the tunnel under Riverfront Parkway next to the bridge on the south side of the Tennessee River.

Jerry Britton, overseeing the bridge work for Mountain States, said the company plans to use a different technique to break and dispose of bridge concrete on the south side of the river.

"The Passage won't see that kind of damage," Mr. Britton said. "A lot of stuff there is more expensive than fixing concrete." Kim Keelor, a TDOT spokeswoman, said the state will do its best so that no unforeseen conditions develop to damage The Passage.

"Unfortunately, the launch had to be sacrificed," she said.

Mr. Britton said work will shift to the south side of the river next September.

The Passage at Ross's Landing marks the forced departure of Cherokees in 1838 for the 1,000-mile march known as the Trail of Tears.

Mr. Kral said the ramp will be repaired after the heavy work is done on the north side of the bridge, which he estimated will be within the next six months.

"We'll evaluate the damage and get with the state and get it worked out," Mr. Kral said.

Mr. Britton said the ramp will be repaired.

"I imagine Mountain States will have it fixed," he said.

The bridge closed last month for two years to undergo a \$13 million reconstruction project.

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