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Time for a new span: World War II-era Tok River Bridge is being replaced

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Old Tok River Bridge.

- Photos taken by Rachel Tomsha, DOT&PF employee



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Tok River Bridge deconstruction.

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FAIRBANKS — Motorists on the Alaska Highway between Tok and the Canada border no longer traverse a World War II-era bridge.

Built between 1943 and 1944, the original truss-style bridge crossing the Tok River at Milepost 1309 has been replaced by a temporary detour bridge that motorists will use until a final overpass is complete.

The last truss-style bridge remaining between the Canada border and Anchorage is still somewhat in place, but crews started its demolition Oct. 26.

A new bridge with an expected 75-year life span and \$9.9 million price tag is expected to be complete by October 2019. HC Contractors was awarded the contract.

The new overpass will eliminate height restrictions for oversized loads. Previously, clearance was restricted to 15 feet 8 inches because of trusses.

A detour was required so the new bridge could be built in the same location, thereby keeping the road straight and greatly reducing the need for construction delays. Foundation, piling and abutment work will be required before the new bridge can be complete.

Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities spokeswoman Danielle Tessen explained that the old bridge had exceeded its 50-year design life.

“The cost for inspection and maintenance would exceed the cost of a new bridge,” she said.

Aside from eliminating height restrictions, the new bridge will be significantly bigger: 360 feet long instead of 250 feet and 43 feet wide instead of 30 feet.

Because the old bridge has lead paint, scraps will be sent to the Lower 48 for abatement, as Alaska has no facility to deal with the hazard, according to Tessen.

While the Alaska Highway is famous for being constructed by the Army — particularly teams of African-Americans — Tessen isn’t entirely sure who built the original Tok River bridge. She suspects the federally run Alaska Road Commission hired a government contractor.

DOT did hire a historian from the State Historic Preservation Office to document the old bridge before its removal.

In the long term, DOT officials hope the improved trucking capabilities of the new bridge will benefit potential construction of an Alaska natural gas pipeline.

Contact staff writer Robin Wood at 459-7510. Follow him on Twitter: @FDNMcity.