

Bridge report had officials scrambling

Citizen Nov 3/11 A6

Language in study on Montreal span deemed 'alarming'

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MONTREAL • Federal officials scrambled behind closed doors in January at a meeting over the safety of the crumbling Champlain Bridge, concerned about "alarming" language in a structural analysis that they hoped to keep secret.

The federal agency that operates the Montreal bridge acknowledged in a meeting at the time that a partial bridge collapse was a possibility, though it was "confident the bridge could be closed to the public before becoming unsafe for users."

And the federal government knew then that the bridge would have to be replaced, yet waited until October to decide it would build a new span.

Those are among the disclosures in secret Transport Canada briefing notes obtained by researcher Ken Rubin via an access-to-information request.

The notes, dated Jan. 19, 2011, were prepared by Transport Canada to brief Rob Merrifield (who was then minister of state for transport) about a Champlain "structural health assessment" study.

That study, conducted by the engineering firm Delcan, was dated Dec. 15, 2010.

"Some of the language used in the (Delcan) report to describe the current condition of the bridge could be alarming," the briefing notes state.

Among other things, Delcan found there was a "risk of partial collapse of the bridge, or the collapse of a span."

The briefing notes indicate "there is no plan to publicly release the Delcan study and/or its conclusions." But, the notes continue, "leaks are always possible and it is expected that such leaks would generate regional and local media attention."

The briefing notes suggest Transport Canada should prepare a "responsive communications approach" in case the Delcan report was leaked to the media.

The Quebec newspaper *La Presse* obtained the report and published excerpts on March 17. A day later, Conservative Senator Larry Smith announced the federal government would spend an extra \$158 million fixing the Champlain. "Federally owned Montreal bridges are currently safe," Smith said at the time.

Still, Transport Canada officials "had concerns with the specific terminology" used in the Delcan report. That led to a Jan. 6, 2011, meeting between officials at Transport Canada and the federal Jacques Cartier and Champlain Bridges Inc. (JCCBI) to "obtain a common understanding of statements presented in the Delcan report."

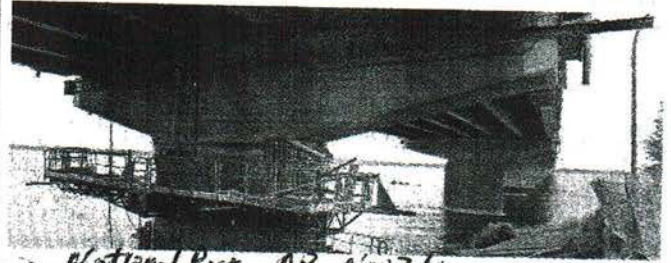
Two of Delcan's points were of particular concern to Transport Canada, the briefing notes indicate: the bridge is in "very poor condition," Delcan had found, noting deterioration is expected to continue and "extreme vigilance" is required.

In the Jan. 6 meeting, JCCBI said it was aware of the severity of the deterioration and continued "to closely monitor the situation through annual independent inspections," the briefing notes state.

POSTMEDIA NEWS

Montreal Gazette

TRANSPORT CANADA OFFICIALS KEPT FEARS OF CHAMPLAIN BRIDGE COLLAPSE A SECRET



National Post A3 Nov 3/11

Montreal Federal officials knew that a partial collapse of the crumbling Champlain Bridge, pictured, was a possibility last January, but kept it a secret. The federal agency that operates the Montreal bridge acknowledged in a meeting that a partial bridge collapse was a possibility, though it was "confident the bridge could be closed to the public before becoming unsafe for users." Those are among the disclosures in secret Transport Canada briefing notes obtained by researcher Ken Rubin via an access-to-information request. The notes, dated Jan. 19, 2011, were prepared by Transport Canada to brief Rob Merrifield, minister of state for transport at the time, about a Champlain "structural health assessment" study. *Postmedia News*