

[Click to Print](#)

Story Published on Tuesday, April 28, 2009



Gov. Phil Bredesen and other dignitaries were present for the groundbreaking of the new Siam Bridge project in Carter County Monday afternoon. (Lee Talbert / Johnson City Press)

By John Thompson  
Elizabethton Bureau Chief  
[jthompson@johnsoncitypress.com](mailto:jthompson@johnsoncitypress.com)

Carter County ended a 13-year wait on Monday afternoon when Gov. Phil Bredesen led a group of state and local dignitaries in breaking ground for a new bridge across the Watauga River in the Siam community.

Bredesen stood before the current bridge that will be replaced by the new bridge and told the crowd “this one-lane bridge is in a dangerous curve, is nearly 70 years old and carries close to 100 vehicles a day.”

As he was speaking about the need for a safer bridge many in the audience held their breath as an accident almost occurred on the bridge. A large southbound pickup truck started across the bridge at the same time a small northbound car was about halfway across. The truck stopped and started to backup but there was a small car following the pickup truck. Fortunately, all three drivers were alert despite all the hoopla from the governor’s visit and an accident was avoided, but the suspense reinforced the governor’s emphasis that the 70-year old bridge “had outlived its usefulness.”

Sen. Rusty Crowe, R-Johnson City, said the current bridge “is a good example of the needs Tennessee counties face each year in terms of transportation. Replacing this bridge is a good first step toward improving our infrastructure in Carter County.”

Carter County Mayor Johnny Holder said the bridge replacement “has been a long time in coming.”

Tennessee House Speaker Kent Williams said the bridge has been a safety concern for some time.

A tragedy occurred at the bridge nearly 15 years ago when three members of a family were killed when their van missed the 90-degree approach to the bridge and plummeted into the river.

Williams said the replacement bridge was a long time in coming, due in part to the 20 percent local matching funds for

build projects using federal funds. Since the replacement bridge is being built with federal stimulus funds, there will be no requirement for matching funds.

Carter County has already sent \$416,758.50 to the state for its share of matching funds to pay for design work and construction on the bridge. Transportation Commissioner Gerald Nicely accompanied the governor on Monday and said the county's share of the construction funds would be returned to the county.

Bredesen said the fact the local governments will not be required to pay matching funds on the stimulus grants is especially significant during the current economic hard times.

The governor said all 10 of the bridge projects that have already been approved for stimulus money are bridges owned by local governments in rural communities.

"Hundreds of workers, from the bridge builders to the dump truck drivers, will be employed on this Recovery Act project," Nicely said. "This is one of many projects in Tennessee that will utilize Recovery Act funds to repair our aging infrastructure and create jobs in our economically distressed areas."

Williams and Nicely hope to see even bigger construction projects. They spoke of plans for a \$350 million bond program to repair or replace many more bridges in the state, with funding coming from the federal Bridge Replacement program. The Elk Mills Bridge on U.S. Highway 321 would be included in this proposal.

Nicely and Williams said this is the time to invest money in repairing and extending the state's infrastructure, with bond rates at historic lows and construction costs down significantly over recent years