

Businesses struggle as NJ Transit bridge closes Intracoastal Waterway in peak season

ZAC SPENCER For The Press

ATLANTIC CITY — Captain Stewart Rosen estimates he's lost nearly \$15,000 in time, maintenance and fuel from the blockage of the water route behind Atlantic City, and he's not alone.

A lot of water-dependent commerce has taken a hit, including the owner of a local boat yard who said his business can't survive an indefinite closure of the channel.

The New Jersey Transit railroad swing bridge that crosses onto Absecon Island behind the Atlantic City Convention Center reopened Tuesday after being broken for four weeks. While inoperable, it blocked the Intracoastal Waterway to all but the smallest vessels.

The bridge, known as the Beach Bridge or the Beach Thorofare Bridge, sits at a choke point on the waterway behind Atlantic City. The only way around it is to circle the ocean side of the island.

At best, that's a long way. At worst, it's an impossible option as many boats aren't capable, particularly during heavy sea conditions.

Rosen, of Atlantic City, runs a charter business from Chelsea Harbor just south of the Albany Avenue bridge.

"I do most of my pickups at the Golden Nugget," Rosen said. "When that bridge is inaccessible, I need to go all the way south to go north. Down to Longport and then up to the Golden Nugget. It adds 36 miles and around four hours."

He believes the current problem was a broken gear box for which NJ Transit didn't have a replacement on hand.

"We all have breakdowns, but when we have a business we put in place a business-continuity plan," Rosen said. "When something breaks, how are you going to handle it? It's very plain NJ Transit has no plan."

NJ Transit said the part needed to fix the bridge has to be specially produced.

"These parts are not off-the-shelf items, which regrettably, means it takes some time to locate and manufacture the parts," Senior Public Information Officer Paul Milo said in an email. "We are focused on making these repairs as quickly as possible."

Rosen said he'd understand if there were an unforeseen accident where something knocked into the bridge, but thinks wear-and-tear parts should be kept on hand.

Capt. John McLaughlin of Sea Tow in Atlantic City feels the same. He estimates he's lost 10% to 15% of his business since the closure.

“How can they shut down the ICW like that,” McLaughlin said. “We can’t go out in the ocean if it’s a small craft advisory, now you’re towing a small boat in a dangerous situation. It’s not just me, that poor guy in the Atlantic City boatyard.”

That poor guy is Jeff Jastrzembski, the owner and operator of All Marine Center across Albany Avenue from Atlantic City High School and south of the closed bridge. The Marine Center is where McLaughlin often takes boats in trouble.

“Say a boat at the Nugget is sinking, I’m the closest travel lift,” Jastrzembski said. “Last year at this time I had maybe 10 emergency haul outs. I’m losing business.”

He estimates he’s down a minimum of 25% from the same time last season. In addition to working on boats, he also provides rack storage, launching vessels for customers as they need them.

Many of those clients like to head north to the Cove in Brigantine and with that option cut off, they don’t go out at all. That means he’s also not selling them fuel.

The Wonder Bar next to the Albany Avenue bridge and south of the rail bridge has also seen a loss of revenue from boat traffic. Co-owner Brian Miranda said this is the worst time of the year for a bridge shutdown.

“It cuts the city off from a maritime standpoint into two,” Miranda said. “I’m fortunate that my restaurant-bar is on the water, but people can’t get to me. We have three or four months of summertime and the people enjoy being on their boats but a bunch of them can’t do it. They don’t have boats that can go out on the ocean.”

Like Rosen and others, Miranda thinks someone should be held accountable.

“I’m sure if I dropped an I-beam across the Intracoastal Waterway and left it there for three or four weeks, someone would be knocking on my door. No one seems to care.”

Sixth Ward Atlantic City Councilman Jesse Kurtz, who said the All Marine Center and Wonder Bar are the two biggest businesses in his district, sees the bridge’s neglect as indicative of a greater concern.

“I look at the water access as one of the really strong assets in Atlantic City and the surrounding area, and I think that gets overlooked,” Kurtz said. “That’s not the type of situation we want to have here if we want to leverage the asset of being an island. It’s important to have that boat traffic, especially from Brigantine.”

Kurtz also pointed to the possible safety concern of the marine police and Coast Guard, both of whom are located by the Golden Nugget north of the rail bridge, being delayed if they should have to respond to an issue in the back bay south of the rail bridge.

The Coast Guard said it monitors the status of the bridge daily and they didn’t have a call that the closed bridge adversely affected. Public Affairs Officer Lt. Commander Daniel Schrader said a substation in north Ocean City maintains a 24/7 response posture during peak boating season in the summer and is positioned to respond to calls south of the bridge when it was closed.

Captain Rosen is cautiously optimistic for the rest of the season now that the bridge is fixed.

“Time will make us feel better,” Rosen said. “Hopefully New Jersey Transit will be proactive in stockpiling parts for maintenance so we don’t have disruptions of this sort again. If parts have to be replaced each time, perhaps it’s time for a new bridge.”

