

# The Pueblo Chieftain

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Ritter tours bridge project

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CHIEFTAIN PHOTOS/MIKE SWEENEY -- Construction continues Friday on the West Fourth Street bridge over the rail yard and Arkansas River.



Gov. Bill Ritter listens to Karen Rowe, the Colorado Department of Transportation's resident engineer overseeing construction of the West Fourth Street bridge, as she explains the cantilever construction system employed to build the structure during a tour of the site Friday.

*Governor inspects work on West Fourth Street bridge during a tour of Southeastern Colorado on Friday.*

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THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

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Gov. Bill Ritter on Friday toured the West Fourth Street bridge project and visited with youths at the Pueblo Workforce Center, taking a firsthand look at how things are operating at both sites.

The two stops were part of an ongoing outreach tour of the state that Ritter initiated shortly after becoming governor.

The governor, who walked with several community members and elected officials to within 15 feet of the western end of the bridge work, called the project an engineering marvel.

"I want to congratulate all the people who are working on this bridge and thank the folks from the

Department of Transportation," Ritter said.

The governor was joined by Pueblo-area lawmakers - Sen. Abel Tapia and Reps. Sal Pace and Buffy McFadyen

- as well as newly appointed transportation Commissioner Gilbert Ortiz.

The new structure traverses the Arkansas River and much of the Pueblo railroad yard. Construction of the new bridge began in December 2007, but was halted for about a half-hour during the governor's visit Friday.

Ritter said that when completed in 2011, the bridge will have the longest span (pier to pier) of any state highway bridge in Colorado.

The Colorado Department of Transportation is rebuilding two bridges for the project - one eastbound and one westbound - because officials said the 51-year-old bridge is structurally deficient, functionally obsolete and rated in poor condition.

"Transportation is both a public safety issue and a quality of life issue," Ritter said, wearing a bright orange hard hat while addressing those in attendance.

Ritter said that although the construction of the bridge started prior to the passing of his FASTER bill, which is expected to generate about \$265 million annually for transportation improvements, the \$35 million project is a prime example of the type of work the legislation is designed to address.

"The bill is about transportation and really about how we ensure public safety. The bridge that this replaces is a 24 out of 100 and is defined structurally deficient. If you get below 50, you are structurally deficient," Ritter said.

"The (current) bridge is still absolutely travelable, you can still travel on it but it is not something that we would want in place for another 10 years. It shows a lot of foresight by the people involved in this project to put this in place."

According to transportation department officials, the CDOT's Region 2 had to save its annual bridge funding for four years to accumulate enough funding to pay for the project.

When the legislation is fully implemented in three years, the fund will provide about \$100 million annually for bridge improvements across the state.

According to officials, Pueblo County has seven poorly rated bridges eligible for FASTER funding. The cost of repairing those structures is estimated at a minimum of \$52 million.

Following the tour of the bridge, Ritter joined about 70 citizens and youths at the Pueblo Workforce Center

to discuss the center's summer work program.

Several local businesses and organizations are helping youngsters by providing work for the summer and longer.

The project recently was awarded \$646,000 from President Barack Obama's economic stimulus plan.

Following the event, Ritter was greeted by members of Pueblo City Firefighters Local 3, who were holding signs asking, "Why does Ritter hate firefighters?"

The firefighters said they were protesting Ritter's veto of Senate Bill 180, concerning collective bargaining by employees of public safety agencies.

"We are wondering why he vetoed this bill, plain and simple. We worked very hard on this bill. We want to know why he didn't sign this into law. We supported him to get elected and he has turned his back on us and he hasn't done what he said he would do," firefighter Chris Gillispie said.

Ritter wrapped up his visit to Southern Colorado on Friday evening in La Junta where he met with citizens during a public picnic at Tippy Martinez Park

Ritter spoke about issues facing the Lower Arkansas Valley in a town-hall meeting format.

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