

Work beginning on City Bridge

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The Walsh Construction yard on Pawtucket Street is shown. Construction crews have begun the initial work on what is expected to be a three-year project to build a new Textile Memorial Bridge to replace the 115-year-old existing span across the Merrimack River. Sun/Bob Whitaker

LOWELL -- Construction crews have begun the initial work on what is expected to be a three-year project to build a new Textile Memorial Bridge to replace the 115-year-old existing span across the Merrimack River.

Walsh Construction Co. has had workers kickstart the effort by building a construction access road on the North side of the Merrimack River to enable crews to begin work on the mid-river pier for the new bridge.

The crews have also begun terminating all utility connections and services to prepare to demolish the former Lowell Mission Church on Pawtucket Street and a multifamily building next door, previously owned by Arthur Faneros. The city took both properties by eminent domain for a right-of-way for the structure which will connect University Avenue to Merrimack Street.

After the buildings are demolished and the new bridge is constructed, work will begin on the roadway tie-ins to switch traffic from the existing bridge.

Walsh Construction received notice to proceed on the project last month and work on the bridge is expected to be completed by 2014, said Richard Nangle, spokesman for the Department of Transportation, that is overseeing the project.

Adam Baacke, Lowell's assistant city manager and director of Planning and Development, said work on the project seems to be proceeding well and he believes the new bridge will strengthen both the physical and economic connections between UMass Lowell and downtown Lowell. The university's North Campus, which will include its new \$70 million, 84,000-square-foot Emerging Technologies and Innovation Center, sits on the north side of the river.

The plan for the new bridge was one of the primary reasons the university decided to purchase the 295,000-square-foot, six-building former St. Joseph's Hospital campus on Pawtucket Street for \$6.3 million in January, said UMass Lowell Chancellor Marty Meehan.

UMass Lowell police are expected to move their headquarters to the site, which will also include a 300-bed dormitory and a 20,000-square-foot university bookstore with a Starbucks franchise.

The new bridge, along with the Emerging Technologies facility and the transformation of the hospital into University Crossing, should help boost university enrollment and economic development in the city, said Meehan.

"The bridge work being done on both sides of the river and the buildings coming down will open up the beauty of the river, which enhances both the campus and the city at large," Meehan said.

Walsh Construction was the lowest of 11 bidders for the project at an expected cost of \$29.3 million. The company is expected to hold weekly job meetings about the project in the coming months and when the meetings commence, the city will have a representative present, said Baacke.

City Councilor Rodney Elliott said he hopes the project is completed on time because the city has already spent millions of dollars on repairing the existing bridge, which he said does not have much life left.

The existing bridge could be taken down when construction of the new bridge is complete, City Manager Bernie Lynch said earlier this summer.

But Lynch said the state will have the final call and mentioned that some have suggested that the old bridge be turned into a pedestrian walkway.