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Baltimore's Francis Scott Key Bridge Collapses: Final Update, Back to Business

CBRE Mid-Atlantic Research

Shipping to the Port of Baltimore returned to normal on June 10, 2024, following the Dali ship collision and resulting Francis Scott Key bridge collapse. The fully operational channel now enables two-way traffic to resume.

What Happened

On March 26, 2024, a large container ship, the Dali, struck the Francis Scott Key Bridge, causing a collapse. The bridge, built in 1977, connected Dundalk, Maryland to Baltimore across the Patapsco River and overlooked the Port of Baltimore. Consequently, the Port of Baltimore was unreachable from the Chesapeake Bay for about two weeks. At that point, temporary channels were opened for limited passage, until the container ship and bridge wreckage were cleared from the channel. On May 20, 2024, the Dali was refloated away from the crash site, allowing all pre-collapse commercial vessels to use the channel with additional safety requirements.

On June 10, 2024, the Fort McHenry Federal Channel was reopened with pre-collapse operational dimensions of 700 feet wide and 50 feet deep. Unified Command consisted of nearly 1,600 individuals; their quick and efficient work led to the port reopening in just 11 weeks. Numerous state and federal financial assistance programs were available to those affected by the closing of the port. What was initially seen as a major supply chain issue has been made into a temporary disruption.

A Monumental Clean-Up Effort

Salvage workers cleared over fifty thousand tons of steel, concrete, and other bridge debris from the Patapsco River and from atop the Dali. After crashing, the Dali remained intact enough to remain afloat, and the vessel was returned to the port after debris was removed.

The Port of Baltimore Reopens

Even with the wreckage blocking the port, port commerce did not completely cease. Within two weeks of the initial accident, smaller auxiliary channels were created to allow limited shipping to and from the port. Over 500 vessels navigated around the wreckage through the auxiliary channels. Ships initially enroute to the Port of Baltimore that were unable to use the auxiliary channels were rerouted to other east coast ports, including the Port of Norfolk and the Port of New York & New Jersey.

Going Forward

The Key Bridge handled around 33,000 vehicles per day, much lower than the alternative transportation arteries such as the West side of I-695 handling nearly 200,000 vehicles. Most traffic consisted of commuters as well as trucks carrying hazardous materials. While commuters can reroute to cross the Patapsco River through the Fort McHenry tunnel or the Baltimore Harbor tunnel, hazmat trucks are not permitted to use these roadways, leaving them to travel through Baltimore City or around Baltimore on I-695, both of which slow the transportation process. While the major, short-term problem of reopening the port has been solved, replacing the Key Bridge will take substantially longer. Implications to logistics are expected to be limited to hazardous materials.

The Maryland Transportation Authority (MDTA) has estimated that the cost to rebuild the Key Bridge will be between $1.7 and $1.9 billion, with an estimated completion of Fall 2028. On May 7, the MDTA hosted a virtual industry forum for stakeholders, where representatives discussed the Progressive Design-Build process and information on involvement. In the coming weeks, the MDTA will accept requests for proposals (RFPs) and award contracts in the summer.

Sources: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, CBRE Baltimore Industrial Teams, Key Bridge Response 2024, Office of Governor Wes Moore, Maryland Transportation Authority, Maryland State Archives, Data Services Division Traffic Monitoring System and Maryland State Highway Administration Traffic Monitoring Program, The White House, The New York Times, WBAL-TV

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