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Highway 'Blockade' Loosened as Businesses Complain

By Maria Antonova

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City Hall said Friday that it agreed to reopen an extra two lanes on the busy highway to Sheremetyevo Airport, following a reprimand from Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and complaints from businesses of a "blockade" on Leningradskoye Shosse.

Construction work on a bridge owned by Moscow but located in the neighboring town of Khimki brought traffic to a near standstill for four days last week, causing hundreds of passengers to miss flights and headaches for local businesses.

IKEA, which operates the Khimki Mega mall, said Friday that the number of shoppers in its store there fell by 30 percent last week. The company was not warned about the construction-related traffic and may file a lawsuit, spokeswoman Oksana Belaichuk told reporters.

Sheremetyevo director Mikhail Vasilenko complained earlier in the week that Moscow officials were blocking the highway to benefit Vnukovo Airport, which is owned by City Hall.

The State Duma requested information from the Moscow regional government regarding damages to companies' finances and business reputations resulting from the massive traffic jams caused by work on a small bridge.

State television covered the story heavily over the weekend, suggesting that little work was being done. The planned 140 million rubles in repairs will prolong the bridge's life for up to seven years, the reports said, after which a new bridge costing 5 billion rubles would be needed.

Moscow had said it closed all but two lanes on the bridge to ensure that renovations were finished by Oct. 1.

First Deputy Mayor Pyotr Biryukov said in televised comments that keeping four of the road's six lanes open would push back the finish date to Nov. 1.

Despite the reopened lanes, motorists said the work would be a heavy burden for Muscovites headed north.

"How are people supposed to live and travel?" said Vyacheslav Lysakov, head of the Freedom of Choice drivers association, Interfax reported. "The situation will only worsen as the rainy season sets in, not to mention snow."

Putin ordered one of his deputies, Sergei Ivanov, to resolve the problem during a Presidium meeting on Thursday. Later that day, officials from Moscow, the Moscow region and the Transportation Ministry held an emergency meeting and agreed to open the extra lanes.

To solve Leningradskoye Shosse's traffic problems, the Moscow region must repair the highway beyond the Moscow Ring Road, First Deputy Mayor Vladimir Resin said Friday, describing the city's efforts to renovate the road within the city and remove traffic lights.

Critics have lambasted Moscow's work to widen the highway to 12 lanes, since the road would still have to pass through a six-lane section in Khimki.

Moscow region Governor Boris Gromov told reporters that responsibility for the bridge lay with Moscow, although he said he would be ready to take ownership once the city renovates the structure.

"The whole road belongs to the city of Moscow," Gromov told reporters in televised comments.

He also joked that travelers should consider ditching their cars for helicopters to travel like he does. "That way you don't need roads," he said.

Mayor Yury Luzhkov has not commented on the scandal. Last week, he met a delegation of monks from Mount Athos, in Greece, and called on Muscovites to boycott Moldovan products.

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