

New Detroit bridge backers don't have numbers despite Repub Gov Snyder's championship

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DETROIT-WINDSOR CROSSINGS | **DRIC** | **NITC**



Supporters of a new Detroit Windsor Bridge (known by the acronyms DRIC or NITC) don't have support in the state legislature to pass the enabling legislation. This was the conclusion local reporters drew from remarks made and informal discussions with legislators on a tour of the bridge site Monday.

Chair of the Michigan State Senate committee with jurisdiction Mike Kowall told the Windsor Star a vote now would see the enabling legislation rejected. Kowall who favors the joint government (Canada and Michigan) sponsored toll bridge said "Absolutely not" to the blunt reporter's question of whether the numbers were there for the bridge in the heavily Republican senate.

What had previously been a partisan divide on the issue - Democrats favoring the new bridge, Republicans skeptical if not in opposition - had seemed to be upset when Rick Snyder the new Republican governor was elected in the Republican landslide of Nov 2010.

He has become a strong proponent of the new NITC bridge.

But Snyder seems to have little sway in the state legislature where the only major Republican supporter is senator Mike Kowall, chairman of the senate economic development committee. He organized yesterday's "Fact Finding" tour for legislators and journalists to enable both sides to become more familiar with the setting of the proposal, hear one another's views and discuss the issue - which has been the major local controversy in Detroit and Windsor for a decade.



At question is whether to permit the established Ambassador Bridge company to build a modern new 6-lane span alongside its 80 year old 4-lane suspension bridge or to build a new Canada-Michigan governments' sponsored, but investor financed and operated, toll bridge Delray-Sandwich, 1.8 miles, 3km downstream - the DRIC, or New International Trade Crossing (NITC) as the project is now known.

The Moroun family, owners of the Ambassador Bridge were on the tour and speaking to the theme that the new government NITC bridge, heavily supported by the Canadian government would be unfair competition with an all-American business, and that it threatened Michigan taxpayers with potentially large losses.



Matthew Maroun junior, Ambassador Bridge company - W Star

Opponents of the new bridge say that it is bound to lose money heavily because total Michigan-Ontario crossing traffic has been flat or declining for a decade. Supporters say extra capacity is needed to relieve congestion and delays at the border. Opponents say the congestion is a product more of border inspection procedures than bridge capacity.

The Canadians, virtually unanimous in favor of the NITC and anti-Ambassador Parallel span, have responded to complaints about the cost of NITC losses to Michigan taxpayers by pledging to put up to \$550m toward the costs of connections to the US Interstate system in Detroit as well as paying for their half of the span and their approaches. But they would recover their investments from future bridge revenues, so it is a kind of loan or equity stake in the project.

The supporters of the NITC bridge say that "21st century infrastructure" is needed for the economic health of the border region.

Windsor Mayor Eddie Francis told the group this week that the NITC plan "allows us to compete with the rest of the world with modern infrastructure."

Both sides in the dispute advocate a modern bridge.

Parkway - important connection or road-to-nowhere

For now the problems of the Moroun's planned Ambassador Bridge Parallel Span are that it faces solid opposition on the Windsor Canada side because of the lack of any quality highway connection to the Canadian expressway network. It dumps its stream of heavy truck traffic onto local business and residential streets. Trucks rumble all day and night, brakes squealing at each of many traffic signals.



By contrast a modern Windsor Essex Parkway is already getting under construction providing for a direct connection between the expressways, especially H401 to Toronto, and the NITC approaches in Sandwich.



The connector approach road (Windsor Essex Parkway) could be extended the extra 1.5 miles, 2.5km to the Ambassador Bridge plaza, but for now the only firm plan is to take the connector road to the NITC plaza. New bridge supporters see the \$1 billion+ Parkway as a commitment that could make the new bridge "inevitable." (see Windsor Star cartoon)

But alternatively it may damage political support for the new bridge, and become a symbol of reckless big spending - a "Parkway to Nowhere" in the absence of any NITC bridge or connection to the Ambassador Bridge Plaza, so long as the Michigan legislature blocks a start on the NITC bridge.

The new bridge has other problems - supporters who put arguments that don't really support the bridge.

Embarrassing champion

Local state representative Rashida Tlaib, Dem-Detroit made a passionate speech to the tour group this week on the need for a legally binding "community development agreement" in the NITC legislation, providing for more "sustainable housing" development and "new jobs" as well as other relief for Delray where the NITC bridge would land on the US side.

She called these "accountability measures" proclaiming: "We want to reinvent the city of Detroit... this is part of it. ... Let's build it right."

Tlaib has said much of this many times before, and is apparently sincere and tenacious.

But such statements hardly help the cause of the NITC bridge, since they are tangible evidence of the determination of bridge supporters in the legislature to load it up with the costs of local 'pork.' They increase concerns that the new bridge is more about spending for extraneous 'goodies' for voters than it is for transportation.

Not all opinion is for or against, although nuanced views get less publicity from journalists. They naturally highlight black and white.

Longterm project, no urgency

The Detroit Free Press reports state representative Bradford Jacobsen (Repub) as

saying at the end of the tour: "I see the need for the project in the long term," and "I see the advantage to this location (for the bridge)."

But he's concerned about building it before the traffic will support the \$3 billion or so needed for construction of the span plus its approaches and the cost of all the duplication of border inspection and immigration facilities.

Others have similar attitudes of caution about the new bridge as a government sponsored project. That is portrayed by NITC supporters as a sign of being "bought by the Morouns." No doubt Morouns' money buys some opposition to the competing span, but there are plenty of legitimate reasons for caution. Foreseeable traffic volumes hardly suggest any urgency.



Matty Moroun, Ambassador Bridge co owner



Tlaib

The Ambassador Bridge is indeed a "monopoly" for very local truck traffic Detroit-Windsor. There are two more lanes nearby for cars and specially specified smaller trucks in the Detroit Windsor Tunnel, owned by American Roads LLC.

But for longer distance traffic it is no monopoly. Chicago-Toronto and Indianapolis-Toronto or Montreal are a very similar distance via the Ambassador in Detroit-Windsor and the Blue Water Bridge in Port Huron-Sarnia.

57 miles, 92km north of the Ambassador Bridge is the Blue Water Bridge. This twin span 6-laner is directly connected to I-69 and I-94 on the US side and Canada's H401 via a straight shot on H402.

Truck traffic between the US south and the midwest and the economic heart of Canada in Ontario and Quebec already has a competitive alternative to the Moroun's bridge in central Detroit as well as the several crossings of the Niagara River to the east.

This looks like one of those political and financial sagas that will go on and on.

website of NITC bridge supporters:

<http://buildthedricnow.com/>





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