Should taxpayers finance a new border crossing?

NO: DRIC unnecessary, study wastes state money

BY DAVE AGEMA

The Detroit River International Crossing represents a massive waste of taxpayer money brought to you by the same people who managed to complete the Zilwaukee Bridge five years late and 62% over budget. At least there were good reasons for building the Zilwaukee Bridge. The same cannot be said for the project known as DRIC.

DRIC is unnecessary because cross-border traffic has continuously declined over the last decade. Border traffic has decreased every year since 1999, and there is no urgent need for the state to build a bridge. So far this year, northern border traffic is down 7%, so it's not just Detroit.

Fortunately, the Ambassador Bridge is building a state-of-the-art new span. With technology and facility improvements in recent years, there is no urgent need for public funds to be wasted on a separate bridge that traffic will not be able to justify for decades to come.

The DRIC is a $4-billion to $5-billion boondoggle, depending on which cost estimates you believe. And according to Canada, it wouldn't be ready until at least 2015. The cost of just the U.S. portion is estimated at $2 billion. How far could $2 billion go toward worthy road projects around the region and state that are needed right now? When every budget in state government has been cut to the bone, the DRIC study continues to exhaust scarce road dollars. While the state's financial situation will lead to an overall transportation budget cut of 27.6%, MDOT refuses to let go of the DRIC bridge. By comparison, the Zilwaukee Bridge's $127-million cost looks like a bargain.

The Ambassador Bridge Enhancement Span, which is an integral part of the Gateway Project, needs no taxpayer funding. According to DRIC's own consultants, the Gateway Project will accommodate 80% more traffic at the privately funded Ambassador Bridge.

Without further taxpayer money, our border will be served by the Ambassador Bridge and its planned second span, the twin-span Blue Water Bridge and improved U.S. plaza, the Detroit & Windsor Tunnel, the Detroit-Windsor Truck Ferry, the Port Huron rail tunnel, the Detroit rail tunnel,
and the prospect of a new double-stack rail tunnel in Detroit. MDOT sometimes suggests that its DRIC bridge provides redundancy, but MDOT, using the same logic, isn't planning to duplicate I-75 or the Mackinac Bridge.

MDOT's planning for the Blue Water Bridge second span in the 1990s is a blueprint for the DRIC. The studies were completed in 1983, but the new span wasn't built until 1996 -- after traffic increased to justify the project. Where was the new span in Port Huron built? Right next to the old bridge, to maximize the investment in existing roads.

A DRIC bridge is a costly government solution in search of a problem. What makes more sense is for MDOT to spend that money to improve our current infrastructure.

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