

Sides remain entrenched after cross-border tour

Vote for public bridge would fail today, says Michigan senator

BY DOUG SCHMIDT, THE WINDSOR STAR AUGUST 16, 2011

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Detroit International Bridge Company's Matthew Moroun speaks at the Ambassador bridge on a tour of government officials during an Economic Development Committee Bridge tour in Detroit on Aug. 15, 2011.

Photograph by: Jason Kryk, The Windsor Star

Ontario may have begun its big dig to the border, but if a vote were held today on the New International Trade Crossing, Michigan's politicians would reject a new border bridge, said a leader of the state assembly.

"If my members were forced to vote today, the answer would be no," said Mike Kowall, chairman of the Michigan Senate economic development committee.

Asked whether the necessary votes could be found for a project being championed by Gov. Rick Snyder, a fellow Republican, he responded: "Absolutely not."

More than a dozen state senate and house representatives spent Monday visiting sites on both sides of the border to view first-hand the locations of a proposed new route and public crossing, as well as that of a competing private-sector twinning proposal of the Ambassador Bridge.

The tour, organized by Kowall's staff and complete with proponents from both sides of the issue tagging along, was aimed at "clearing up any of the untruths" the participating Michigan politicians accused both sides of spreading to voters.

But a bus tour designed to, according to Kowall, "deal with facts, not emotion," quickly became a rolling

forum for sometimes-fiery debate between supporters of the NITC and those of the Ambassador Bridge, which has spent millions of dollars on TV advertisements and campaign contributions to fight the public proposal.

The Canadian government and other NITC advocates "don't want to see American capitalists do well," Matthew Moroun, vice-chairman of the Ambassador bridge company owned by his father, charged when given first chance at the microphone.

He argued the twinning was "rip-roaring ready to go" and that "only politics and red tape" stood in the way.

What Moroun described as an ideological battle, however, has become a legal battle, said Tom Shields, a consultant and spokesman for the pro-NITC forces, including the Big Three and other auto companies, area businesses and labour groups. In Detroit, legislators were told of the bridge company's court losses over its "theft" of city property, while they were shown the unfinished "bridge to nowhere" jutting out from the customs plaza on the Windsor side.

"They've already got it halfbuilt - I don't see why they can't finish it," said Detroit Sen. Virgil Smith, a Democrat on the committee who opposes the public link.

Despite repeated assurances by numerous American and Canadian officials on the tour that the billion-dollar project won't cost Michigan taxpayers a dime, some of the legislators remained cautious and suspicious. The bridge company had earlier commissioned a study stating that, even with a Canadian pledge to cover US\$550 million in Michigan up-front construction costs, state taxpayers could still be on the hook for \$100 million per year.

Claims like those may be "factually inaccurate," but the Ambassador Bridge company has "obviously been very successful with all their advertising," Roy Norton, Consul General of Canada at Detroit, told The Star. The bridge company's campaign "is having the desired effect - it's misleading Michigan voters and, unfortunately, having an impact," Norton added.

"We have to sort through a lot of spin . I'm not sold yet," said Sen. Goeff Hansen, who, like Kowall and Gov. Rick Snyder, is a Republican. "I want to see the fine print, the details," added Sen. Mike Nofs, another Republican on the committee.

At one Detroit stop, when the bus unloaded its passengers at the Ambassador duty-free shop, the politicians appeared visibly charmed at being greeted by reclusive octogenarian billionaire Manuel "Matty" Moroun and his wife.

"Every day they delay a competitor, that means more money in their pockets," Windsor West MP Brian Masse, also on the tour, said of the Ambassador Bridge's efforts.

Mayor Eddie Francis, freshly returned from his latest mystery overseas business trip, told the visiting delegates that foreign investors ask about infrastructure and that the new border crossing is raised in his discussions.

The NITC "is the only bridge project that is shovel-ready . despite what you hear," said Francis, adding

the proposed public bridge is also important for jobs in the region and improved quality of life.

"There is no other option on the table," he told the Michigan legislators.

Part of Monday's tour included the big bus winding through weed-choked streets lined with crumbling vacant homes in Delray, one of Detroit's poorest neighbourhoods. Delray would be at the Michigan end of the NITC, and its residents appear willing to host thousands of passing diesel trucks per day.

"At first, we said no, but if done right ...," community activist Debra Williams said during a luncheon stop at the Delray Christian Neighborhood House. Local state representative Rashida Tlaib is lobbying for a negotiated agreement between Delray and any eventual bridge builder that would see local jobs, economic development and environmental mitigation come to the host community.

Missing a promised July 1 deadline for a state assembly voted on the NITC was an embarrassing political setback for Snyder, but even the new fall deadline appears in jeopardy. Kowall, whose committee is first to tackle the necessary bill, said Monday it was only his hope the matter will come to a vote before the end of the year.

It was the first time ever an officially convened session of Michigan's economic development committee travelled across the border, and it was the first time some of those politicians had ever ventured into Canada.

dschmidt@windsorstar.com or 519-255-5586

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