

Opinion

Private sector best equipped to build bridge

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By Mitch Kehetian

Controversy over the Ambassador Bridge is nothing new.

On June 28, 1927, voters in Detroit had heard all the pros and cons of building an international bridge to link the United States and Canada across the Detroit River.

The special election to grant private investors the authority to build the suspension bridge won by an overwhelming count, 66,353 to 8,204.

But it wasn't easy; even then-Mayor John Smith opposed the private enterprise plan drafted by bridge developer Joseph Bower.

How ironic that the calling point came from automotive icon Henry Ford who just days before the election gave the bridge proposal his full blessing.

In a compelling, inspiring outlook on "The Ambassador Bridge," author Phillip P. Mason shares a quote from the founder of Ford Motor Co. The auto giant spoke for free enterprise when he said: "The Detroit International Bridge is an international matter, and I believe that if it is constructed by private enterprise and capital, it will be built quickly and well."

Mason adds that Ford's free enterprise endorsement received widespread publicity."

In essence, it weighed heavily in favor of voter support.

Bridge developer Bower was equally elated.

Mason accurately describes the tempo with this quote from Bower: "We're through arguing. Let's build."

That's now the heated debate between Gov. Rick Snyder and Warren businessman Manuel "Matty" Moroun.

Moroun bought the bridge from the Bower family in 1979.

The Moroun family enterprise has waged a combative television advertising campaign that opposes the building of a new bridge that Snyder wants to be built with ownership by the state and Ontario province. Snyder wants it to rise up from the depths of the old, decaying Delray neighborhood in southwest Detroit.

Moroun's campaign to block the push by Snyder calls for his company to build a second span adjacent to the Ambassador Bridge.

The charges and countercharges over who builds a second bridge, if truly needed, will continue well into the weeks and months ahead.

But as a product of Delray, born and raised there and schooled at Cary Elementary School and Southwestern High, thanks for hearing me out.

Yes, the old Delray neighborhood is desolate with vacant lots, burned out shells, and the once colorful East Jefferson business stretch is in shambles.

The argument to launch a new bridge out of Delray to Windsor sounds good. Get rid of the slums, the scarred image of its rich past. Yes we have to look ahead. We can't dwell on "the good old days."

But I'm not convinced.

When Henry Ford said the private sector can do a better job, he was right. Need I remind you that present-day Ford Motor Car Co. did not seek a government bailout, and it stands as an example of free enterprise.

Gov. Snyder, a Republican businessman, said a new bridge should be publicly owned and would be built without public funding.

Putting aside verbal swipes between Moroun and Snyder, I am puzzled over Snyder's demand that a new bridge be built and governed by the state and the Canadian province of Ontario.

Whatever happened to free enterprise and the "private sector can do it better platform" of the Republican Party?

Henry Ford was right in 1928, and his heirs were right in 2010 at taking the free enterprise road to auto recovery.

In the meantime, governor, if you want to help restore Delray, do it with the help and funding to build affordable housing for Detroit, and the business shops will come back like the "old days."

It's the magic of free enterprise.

Mitch Kehetian is a retired editor from The Macomb Daily. He and his wife, Rose, live in Allen Park, a relatively short distance to Delray.

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