

Michigan DRIC vote delayed until fall

Politicians slam Ambassador Bridge 'misinformation' campaign

DOUG SCHMIDT (feat. COLIN ROBERTSON)

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WINDSOR, Ont. -- Michigan legislators won't be voting on a new public bridge crossing over the Detroit River until the fall, representing an embarrassing political setback for Gov. Rick Snyder who had pledged to have the project approved by July 1.

The news came as a surprise to many Tuesday during a gathering in Windsor of Great Lakes leaders from both sides of the border when Randy Richardville, the Michigan Senate majority leader, was asked by delegates when the multibillion-dollar construction project would begin.

Richardville, in charge of leading the project through the state assembly, said there is still "so much confusion" about the costs and benefits and on the need for the new crossing.

He said many legislators and their constituents are "adamantly opposed" but that they are basing their opinions on "misinformation" being spread by opponents, particularly through special interest group TV commercials.

"He calls it misinformation ... I call it lies," said Michigan state representative Rashida Tlaib, whose Southwest Detroit constituency would host the proposed new span.

Tlaib said a "fear factor" dominates the issue in Lansing's state assembly building, with some legislators too scared to speak out in favour of the public bridge due to the perceived political power of the private interest opposed.

"I find it distressing ... I'm very concerned with this delay," said former Michigan governor and U.S. ambassador to Canada James Blanchard. He accuses the owners of the Ambassador Bridge of being behind the latest stalling of the project and of "misleading and deceiving" legislators and their constituents.

"These ads on TV ... what is going on?" Ontario Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs Monique Smith said during her presentation. Citing the perceived inaccuracies in the attack ads, the Liberal government house leader said there should be tighter rules governing third-party advertising given that misinformation can now be quickly and widely spread through social media and the Internet.

Border bottlenecks hampering the smooth flow of the hundreds of millions of dollars in traded goods that cross the border daily are seen as one of the chief impediments to untapping the economic potential of the region, delegates heard. Co-hosted by the Toronto-based Mowat Centre and the Washington, D.C.-based Brookings Institution, the two-day Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Region summit is being attended by more than 200 delegates, representing senior representatives of government, business, academia and non-profit groups.

If the bridge vote were held today in the Michigan legislature, "it would fail — you guys want the truth, that's the truth," Tlaib told reporters.

"I've asked my colleagues, 'How can we ignore this opportunity?'" said Richardville, who was a keynote speaker. Construction work aside, he said the new bridge would generate 19,000 new Michigan jobs.

Richardville said the next few months will be spent trying to persuade opponents in the state assembly that “this is not just a bridge in Detroit.” He said part of that effort will be showing how the billions of dollars the new bridge would attract in leveraged federal transportation funding will be used across the state.

“I believe this will pass in October,” Richardville told the delegates.

The two federal governments and Ontario have set aside the necessary funds and are waiting for the required Michigan approval in order to proceed with the mega-construction project. Canada has pledged to underwrite any operating shortfalls and has offered Michigan \$550 million toward stateside construction costs.

The owners of the Ambassador Bridge are trying to block construction of the proposed downriver public crossing in favour of their own proposal to twin the existing, private span that is over 80 years old.

The summit, being hosted by the Toronto-based Mowat Centre and the Washington, D.C.-based Brookings Institution, is being held to look at ways to untap the economic potential of a region that, if it were a country of its own, would boast the world’s fourth-largest economy.

“It’s crazy that the world’s greatest trading relationship is being held up in the way it’s being held up,” Mowat Centre director Matthew Mendelsohn told The Star.

“It’s real, real important that we win this battle,” William Rustem, Gov. Snyder’s director of strategy, told one of the summit sessions.

“We have to be optimistic — certainly on the Ontario side, we’re ready to go,” said cabinet minister Smith.

Colin Robertson, a career foreign service officer and senior research fellow of the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute, told delegates he was recently in China where “they built a bridge in six months.” Referring to the 10 years of debating a new Windsor-Detroit crossing, he said: “The rest of the world is not waiting for Canada and the U.S. to get its act together.”

The summit concludes Wednesday.