

Michigan voters clear path for new Detroit-Windsor bridge

Proposal 6 voted down in U.S. election, paving way for new international crossing

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Canada has agreed to pay Michigan's \$550-million share of a new \$1-billion publicly owned international bridge to be built between west Windsor, Ont., to Detroit. Windsor-Essex Parkway

Michigan voters sent a message during Tuesday night's U.S. election: They don't need to weigh in on whether any new bridge should be built between their state and Canada.

Voters defeated Proposal 6, which would have called for a statewide vote on plans for any new international crossing, including a proposed new bridge that would link Windsor, Ont., to Detroit. Slightly more than 60 per cent of voters turned down the proposal, which would have been entrenched in the state's Constitution.

Proposal 6 was one of the final hurdles that needed to be cleared for the building of a new bridge to proceed. It would provide competition for the 83-year-old Ambassador Bridge, Canada's busiest border crossing, owned by billionaire Matty Moroun.

From India, where he is on a trade mission, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper praised the decision.

"We're very pleased to see the support of the people of Michigan for the new bridge between Detroit and Windsor, which is very important to the economies of both our countries," he said. "I look forward, in particular, to working with [President Barack Obama] on the Beyond the Border initiative, which is obviously very important for the opportunities for Canadians and Americans going forward."

Moroun was behind the ballot proposal. He spent more than \$30 million in advertising to promote it to sway voters.

Payment plan disputed

Canada has agreed to pay Michigan's \$550-million share of a new \$1-billion publicly owned international bridge from west Windsor to Detroit.

The People Should Decide ballot committee has long insisted that Michigan taxpayers will eventually end up paying something for a new bridge.

"It is clear the voters resisted amending the Constitution, but it would be a mistake to assume taxpayers support a flawed government bridge that puts taxpayers at risk," committee spokesperson Mickey Blashfield said in a statement. "We have full confidence that the citizens, legislature and financial community will continue to hold any bridge to its promises of 'not one dime of taxpayer money.'"

Windsor West NDP MP Brian Masse said the fact Moroun was able to spend \$30 million on the campaign tells him the Ambassador Bridge tolls are too high.

"The actual government on the Canadian side needs to actually start regulating their toll rates because we have the highest toll rates in Ontario for a bridge that has the highest volumes," Masse said. "I can't understand why we continue to allow that situation to exist when it's clear that volume should actually dictate price, and we should actually be reducing the rates."

Ottawa has never said how much tolls will be on the new bridge. Ottawa has only said tolls will be collected on the Canadian side and be used to pay off the investment.

Canada's ambassador to the U.S., Gary Doer, did not support Proposal 6.

"Two bridges are better than one, for two-way trade, for security, for reliability," he said. "When you look at the proposal that the prime minister and the governor of Michigan came forward with, it cuts out a lot of traffic lights in Windsor. So that's good for the environment and for traffic on our side of the border.

"And it's got the support of all the Great Lakes states and provinces."

Business support

Chambers of commerce and some unions on both sides of the border want a new bridge. They say it will increase trade and create thousands of much-needed jobs — Windsor has Canada's highest unemployment rate.

Matt Marchand, president of the Windsor-Essex Regional Chamber of Commerce, is pleased, saying business groups on both sides of the border campaigned to ensure people heard the facts, in spite of Moroun's advertising blitz.

"We're just looking forward to new cross-border infrastructure and if there are hurdles thrown at it, so be it," he said. "At the end of the day, there's an agreement signed by the prime minister and the governor, along with the voters from Michigan giving the go-ahead."

Marchand believes Moroun will continue to fight construction of a new bridge, likely in the courts.

Sandy Baruah, the CEO of the Detroit Regional Chamber, hopes that isn't the case. He said the result is a clear message from the people of Michigan.

"Matty Moroun and the Ambassador Bridge Company ran an entire campaign and spent \$31-plus million saying 'the People Should Decide.' Now, it'll be up to them to determine if they're going to honour that word — the people have clearly decided that they reject that proposal and that they want this bridge."