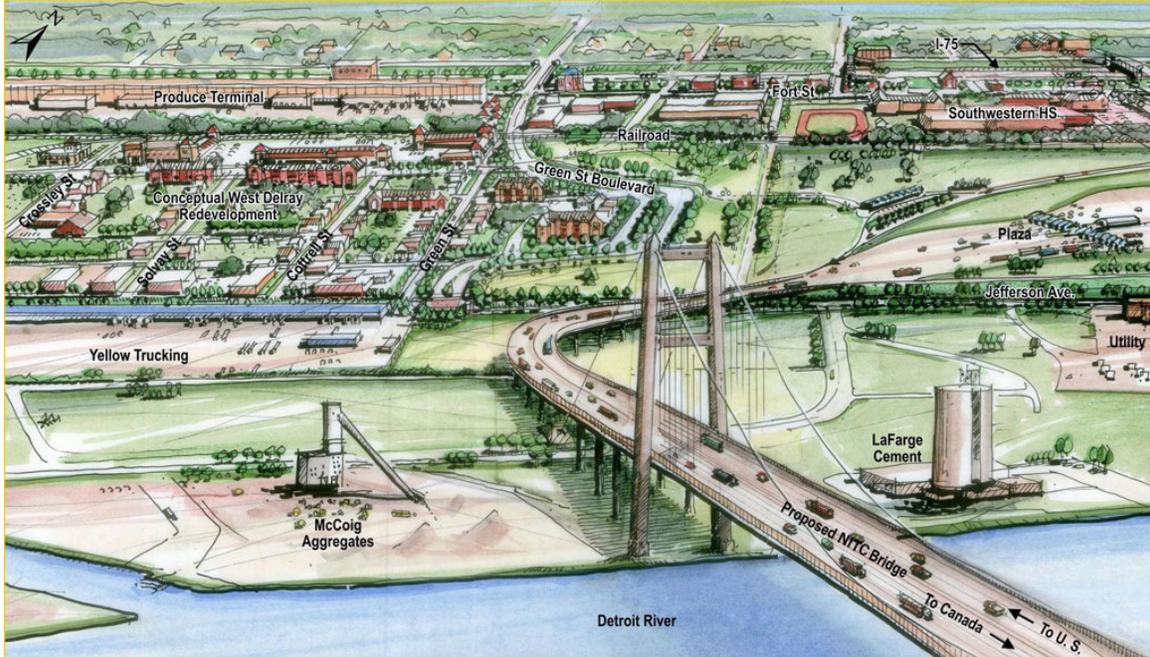


PM Harper applauds rejection of Moroun's proposal; Gov. Snyder says bridge may start in months

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In this 2012 artist's rendering, a proposed new bridge linking Detroit and Windsor, is shown. Prime Minister Stephen Harper is welcoming the decision by voters in Michigan to reject a proposal for a statewide vote on plans for any new international crossing. (HANDOUT/Michigan Department of Transportation)



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Final permits for the \$1-billion government-backed bridge could be in hand and preparation work could start in months following rejection by voters of a ballot proposal backed by Ambassador Bridge owner Matty Moroun that threatened to halt the long-awaited Windsor-Detroit crossing, said Gov. Rick Snyder on Wednesday.

"It will be a few months to a half year" until final permits are in hand and some construction can begin, said Snyder to reporters in Lansing while discussing Tuesday night's election results.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has applauded the decision by voters in Michigan to reject Moroun's controversial ballot proposal that threatened to halt the downriver bridge.

The Canadian government, in the wake of the election decision on Proposal 6, declared on Wednesday it is prepared to march forward on construction of the Detroit River International Crossing (DRIC) that would link the downriver communities of Brighton Beach and Delray.

"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," Harper told reporters while in India where he is on a trade mission.

“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.”

With about 94 per cent of the ballots counted in Michigan, there were 2,573,553 votes against the proposal or 60 per cent and 1,746,802 in favour or 40 per cent.

Moroun’s ballot initiative would have forced a statewide vote before any bridge could be constructed in Michigan.

The proposal was defeated despite Moroun spending a state record \$35 million in advertising and campaign promotion in a bid to win votes. That sum also exceeds the \$30 million Moroun paid to buy the bridge itself in 1979.

Canada’s transportation minister Denis Lebel signed an agreement in June with Snyder to construct the DRIC bridge. The federal government under the plan will lend the state up to \$550 million to cover its share of the project. Canada would recoup the loan through tolls.

“The defeat of Proposal 6 clears the way for the construction of the new bridge across the Detroit River,” said Lebel on Wednesday. “This is good news for travellers, workers and industry on both sides of the border who will benefit from the new publicly-owned bridge.”

He was not immediately clear on exactly how quickly construction on the DRIC bridge could get started, but once completed the new Windsor-Detroit bridge will “attract new investments and business opportunities to boost our local and national economies.”

Officials from the Ambassador Bridge did not immediately respond to messages Wednesday from the Star.

“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,” said company spokesman Mickey Blashfield in a statement provided to the Detroit News.

He defended the spending by the Moroun family on the ballot proposal.

“We are happy with the investment made in this campaign on behalf of taxpayers and the 5,000 families employed by the Ambassador Bridge family of companies,” Blashfield said. “Like any family business we would do it again – and will in different ways – to defend economic freedom and limited government.”

It is more likely another year or two – at best – before construction on the DRIC bridge could kick into full swing, according to Snyder’s office. Much depends on the anticipated legal attack expected to come next from Moroun.

Still outstanding is a required Presidential permit, final approval from parliament in Ottawa, appointment of members to a binational authority, design and issuance of a request for proposals (RFP), selection of a private sector partner to lead construction, plus land acquisition and property demolition on the Detroit side.

But defeating Moroun’s proposal was a “tremendous accomplishment” for the state, said a spokesman for Snyder on Wednesday.

“People made it clear they believe in Michigan’s future and support the governor’s vision of moving forward so we can grow our economy and create jobs,” said Ken Silfven. “The (DRIC) is an integral part of that because it ensures our economic security and helps Michigan products get to foreign markets.”

“It also shows that the truth does matter. People saw through the outrageous claims that were tossed around by those who were bankrolling the proposal. But in the end, the facts won out.”

Canadian Chamber of Commerce President Perrin Beatty praised the voters in Michigan for having “switched on the lights” to the long-awaited DRIC bridge and creation of 10,000 construction jobs.

“This is a great victory for citizens and businesses on both sides of the border,” he said. “Michigan and Canada share one of the largest trade relationships in the world. With this wise decision voters have signalled they are ready to cooperate on a huge project to enhance that partnership.

“Last night’s decision by Michigan voters marks a turning point. Now we need to see the project through.”

Windsor-Essex Regional Chamber President Matt Marchand noted strong cooperation with its federal, provincial and Michigan counterparts played a role in backing Snyder’s efforts to defeat the Moroun initiative.

“We are just delighted with the outcome of the ballot proposal,” he said. “Voters have given the governor a mandate to move forward on infrastructure which we all need and look forward to having.

“Now that he has this mandate, we have a bridge to build and (double-stack) rail tunnel to dig. Let’s get moving on this 21st century infrastructure so that we can create jobs and economic growth.”

Ontario’s government also applauded the decision in Michigan. The province has taken the lead in construction of the \$1.4-billion Windsor-Essex Parkway – a new 11-kilometre highway being constructed to connect Highway 401 directly to the site of the proposed DRIC bridge.

Some had feared the parkway will be a “road to nowhere” should the downriver bridge fail to become reality.

“I am pleased that we will be moving forward with the Detroit River International Crossing,” said Brad Duguid, the province’s economic development minister. “Trade between Ontario and the U.S. is critical to our shared prosperity.

“The new bridge will help boost cross-border trade in the years to come and we continue to support our partners as they work to implement the bridge.”