

Bridge vote 'huge waste of money'

By Dave Battagello, The Windsor Star

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Former Michigan Gov. James Blanchard believes the bridge referendum on the November state ballot touted by Ambassador Bridge owner Matty Moroun is irrelevant and a "huge waste of money" since a binational agreement to build the \$1-billion government-backed downriver bridge was signed in June.

"I don't think the referendum has any effect to be honest," said Blanchard on Monday by phone from Washington. "It will be retroactive to an agreement. The contract was announced and signed in June. Being retroactive, I don't think it will have any effect at all."

Blanchard, a former U.S. ambassador to Canada, worked as a lobbyist for the Detroit River International Crossing.

"It's nothing but mischief and posturing by a billionaire fighting the most important infrastructure project we have."

Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder has been pushing to get a new bridge built.

He signed an agreement in June with Canada's Transportation Minister Denis Lebel. Prime Minister Stephen Harper came to Windsor when the documents were signed and proclaimed the bridge was this nation's top infrastructure priority and promised it would be built.

The Canadian government under the agreement would lend cashstrapped Michigan up to \$550 million for its share of the project - expected to top \$2 billion once feeder roads and plazas are built in Detroit.

But Moroun has successfully gathered more than 600,000 signatures to get on the statewide ballot Nov. 6, asking voters whether they support requiring voter approval before any new international bridge can be constructed in Michigan.

"To think we are looking at amending the constitution to please one billionaire who won't even fix the Michigan Central (train) station is outrageous," Blanchard said. "He's been to jail. But such is the state of politics in the U.S. This puts Michigan politics at a new low."

"Win or lose, I believe he will file another lawsuit (against the DRIC bridge) no matter what. He likes to litigate."

"He cares more about winning the game than anything else. He loves the game, everybody knows that. But I'm very optimistic about the future for this project. I think the prime minister, Mr. Snyder and (Premier Dalton) McGuinty's people all have it right."

A key step in getting the DRIC bridge construction started is a presidential permit from the U.S. Dept. of State.

The process was launched in June, just days after the binational agreement was signed. There has been a public consultation period, but it ends Monday.

Windsor's Chamber of Commerce has added its name to the list of organizations calling on its final approval from Washington. The local chamber issued a letter of support Monday.

"The chamber has been in support of a new border crossing for years and believes this step forward will ensure future economic development and a positive climate for business attraction on both sides of the border," said Matt Marchand, the chamber's president and CEO.

The public comment period for the DRIC bridge's presidential permit was recently extended by Washington until next Monday due to the large number of responses.

A presidential permit is required before construction on the DRIC bridge can proceed and can take up to a year to acquire, but many officials involved in the process hoped it will be fast-tracked with approval coming before the end of this year.

"The chamber's view is we need cross-border infrastructure implemented as soon as possible and the presidential permit is another mechanism by which it can happen," Marchand said.

Steve Tobocman, a former state representative who also served as Democratic Floor Leader in Lansing, also believes the binational agreement signed in June will take precedence over the proposed referendum based on his experience.

"There are too many agreements in place, by too many parties - many who really do want and care passionately about getting this new crossing," he said.

"Commerce seems to be demanding this for the opportunities it would create and improvements it will bring under global competition. This border is so important.

"I think the signing of the agreement will weaken any challenge (by Moroun) even if the referendum would pass."

He also called the referendum a "low point in Michigan politics."

"It demonstrates how a monopoly's interest can greatly influence public policy," Tobocman said.

"You have one interest - profits being made by the Ambassador Bridge company - versus the entire interest of what's best for the Michigan economy."

The presidential permit application for the DRIC bridge can be viewed online at [www.state.gov/p/wha/rt/ permit/](http://www.state.gov/p/wha/rt/permit/).