

Defeat bridge vote, diplomat urges

Consul General talks to Michigan business leaders

By Dave Battagello, The Windsor Star

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Canada's Consul General in Detroit is urging Michigan business leaders to help defeat a referendum on the state's Nov. 6 ballot supported by Ambassador Bridge owner Matty Moroun that would require voter approval for any new Canada-U.S. border crossing in Michigan.

"Defeat the Moroun ballot initiative, stand up and say with full confidence that we are focused on the future and not the past," Roy Norton told a gathering of about 1,000 of Michigan's top economic and business leaders in Grand Rapids.

In his address at the West Michigan Policy Forum, Norton, a major supporter of getting the Detroit River International Crossing bridge in place, noted that 49 per cent of the \$689 billion worth of trade between the U.S. and Canada comes across the MichiganOntario border.

Norton urged the state's voters to stand up to the "cynical, manipulative and greedy private interests" of Moroun.

The two-day event included several Canadians who already understand how the modernization of this area's cross-border trade route - with a new bridge and a new rail tunnel - will generate thousands of direct and spin off jobs.

"It's one of the biggest economic development opportunities this region would have by turning Windsor-Detroit into a logistics and transportation hub," said Matt Marchand, CEO and president of the Windsor Essex Regional Chamber of Commerce.

"For both (the rail and bridge) projects you are hearing here a united front for the new infrastructure between Windsor and Detroit and the importance of it all. There is a buzz about the tremendous amount of trade between Windsor and Detroit and how the outdated infrastructure needs to be replaced."

Those at the forum were citing not only the need for a new bridge and rail tunnel, but also those for airport improvements and intermodal freight centres - where air, rail, waterway and truck cargo can be interchanged, said Marchand, a former employee of the DRTP rail tunnel project.

There is "great consensus among private leaders and public leaders" there must be investment in the Windsor-Detroit region for transportation infrastructure, said Sandy Baruah, president and CEO of the Detroit Regional Chamber, who also attend the forum.

"It will accelerate our growth and advance our manufacturing," he said.

"The better the logistics, the better efficiency there will be in getting our goods into the market place. The more opportunities that creates for our region.

"We have a great opportunity (through a new bridge and rail tunnel) to create something special for our region. We can be the next great logistics hub, the top gateway for North America."

The \$400-million rail tunnel project - known as the Continental Rail Gateway - is nearing completion of its environmental assessment. The project remains in search of government funding before construction will begin.

A new Detroit River rail tunnel would replace the existing tunnel built in 1910. It is sorely needed to help accommodate today's larger double-stacked railway cars.

"There is so much enthusiasm now for this project and what's going on between Michigan and Windsor," said Marge Byington, executive director of corporate affairs for the rail tunnel project.

"People are seeing the potential, looking at the age of the infrastructure and saying we have to go ahead. After all these years, I'm finally see the conversation reach a point where people are saying we have to have this."