

A bridge to somewhere: Billionaire obstructs new Michigan-Ontario crossing

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Various financial and political interests are engaged in a bitter struggle over whether to build a second bridge across the Detroit River to service traffic between Detroit, Michigan and Windsor, Ontario. Selfish profit and business concerns entirely dominate the official debate.

On the one side stands billionaire Manuel “Matty” Maroun, who *personally owns* the Ambassador Bridge, completed in 1929, and his supporters. Maroun has repeatedly blocked a new Michigan-Ontario bridge project known as the Detroit River International Crossing (DRIC). The Ambassador Bridge is the only privately owned border crossing between the US and Canada.

Maroun reaps enormous profits from his bridge monopoly, driven by \$60 million in annual tolls and a state exemption on duty-free gasoline and diesel fuel sales that provides him with a 60 cents per gallon tax break, although the bridge’s pump price is only pennies less than what consumers pay at Detroit’s gas stations.

The Ambassador Bridge is the busiest international border crossing in North America in terms of trade volume: more than 25 percent of all merchandise trade between the US and Canada crosses the bridge. A 2004 Border Transportation Partnership study showed that 150,000 jobs in the region and \$13 billion in annual production depend on the Windsor–Detroit international border crossing.

Maroun, a trucking magnate, is the 321st richest man in America, worth \$1.5 billion, according to Forbes magazine. He has been crying foul over the alleged irreparable loss of profits he will suffer if a new bridge were to be constructed over the Detroit River. Maroun insists there is not enough traffic to warrant the building of a second span.

In reality, traffic across the Detroit River has grown beyond pre-2009 levels despite the fact that many truckers have opted to avoid the notoriously long delays at the facility by using the Port Huron, Michigan-Sarnia, Ontario bridge crossing. An estimated 5.2 million hours are lost in the Ambassador bottlenecks each year for the 7,200 trucks that make the crossing daily. Border delays cost the Canadian government between \$15-30 billion a year in losses, amounting to almost 2 percent of gross domestic product.

Last month, Maroun succeeded in convincing a committee in the Michigan Senate to vote against approving the DRIC proposal, thus preventing the bill from coming to the Senate floor for consideration. Maroun, along with billionaire Tea Party financiers Charles and David Koch, has been one of the largest campaign contributors to Michigan’s politicians.

Maroun, along with family members, donated \$1.5 million to hand-picked Michigan lawmakers over the past two years, while the Koch

brothers footed the bill for a massive, and disingenuous mail and television advertising campaign aimed at Michigan households. The Kochs, free-marketers to the bone, see Maroun’s dispute as a test case for their own crusade against any vestige of government “interference” in the accumulation of private wealth.

Opposing Maroun and the Kochs are powerful sections of Michigan’s political and business establishment. Republican governor Rick Snyder announced last week that a proposal to build a second bridge would be expedited in a matter of “months not years.”

Snyder made the need to pass the bill for a new bridge one of the central themes in his recent State of the State address in Lansing. Members of the powerful Ford family have made rare public appearances to promote the project—the Ford Motor Company loses some \$14 million a year due to delays at the Ambassador.

But this sordid squabble among business elements, as well as their Republican and Democratic mouthpieces, has nothing to do with easing the plight of overworked truck drivers and unemployed construction workers or polluted neighborhoods below the Ambassador Bridge, and everything to do with the profit margins of the manufacturers.

The Canadian government has offered Michigan \$550 million in loans to cover a healthy share of the construction costs and has feted Snyder in Ottawa and Toronto. Even local courts have weighed in on the issue. In the wake of Maroun’s victory in the Michigan Senate, a judge ruled the 84-year-old magnate in contempt of court for failing to honor an undertaking to improve gateway facilities at the Detroit crossing. After a 17-month-long I-75 roadway construction project, Maroun failed to complete the connecting expressway ramps to his bridge.

The antiquated Ambassador Bridge

Designed in an era when small trucks and lightweight cars were relatively new phenomena, the Ambassador now carries trucks pulling trailers up to 53 feet in length and exceeding in some cases 80,000 pounds gross vehicle weight. These same vehicles spend hours trapped on both sides of the Detroit River and suspended in the air waiting to cross during peak times. Moreover, the Department of Homeland Security on the US side makes certain the crossing takes an additional half-hour or more. A dangerous mix of fast-moving cars and slow-moving, heavily loaded trucks further complicates matters.

Additionally, the antiquated Ambassador Bridge has been

undergoing a major concrete paving process closing sections of alternate lanes for the last eight months, making traffic even more of a nightmare. Interestingly enough, while Maroun claims traffic is down, he has plans to complete a twin span next to the existing bridge. To pose the question why is to answer it: he wants all the money.

The proposal for a new span at this location is opposed by neighborhoods on both sides of the river. Moreover, existing underground salt mining operations under and around the bridge and river area pose stability issues for any increase in heavy truck traffic through the area. Studies have shown that new construction increases the possibility of a catastrophic collapse. Notably, this author has seen virtually no commentary on this critical issue, except perhaps in the DRIC study itself.

Only a few years ago a bridge crumbled into the Mississippi River in Minneapolis, Minnesota due to official refusal to mandate repairs whose need was well known. The problem exists also in Canada, as at least fourteen bridges or overpasses in the Montreal, Quebec area are now deemed unsafe.

A new bridge constructed two miles downriver from the Ambassador would vastly improve traffic and safety. A new bridge would have direct interstate roads and ramps connecting the US and Canada, diverting traffic from downtown Windsor and Detroit. At present, trucks must exit expressways and wind slowly around construction projects that were never completed. An untold quantity of direct diesel exhaust descends into the neighborhoods beneath the current bridge and must have an impact on residents' health.

The role of government

At the heart of the matter is the contention that one fabulously wealthy individual's "right to make a profit" stands above social needs. In most of the advanced industrial world, governments control infrastructure projects, and updating roads, bridges, and railroads long ago became the state's responsibility. Maroun's personal ownership of a primary link between two nations is astounding, socially reactionary and irrational.

Even the new US Attorney for the Eastern District of Michigan, which includes Detroit, Barbara McQuade, admitted that Maroun's corporation, Detroit International Bridge Company, had no legal authority. McQuade observed that "DIBC is not a federal instrumentality, of any kind, or any other type of arm, appendage, servant, or agent whatsoever of the United States."

The wrangling would be comical, if not for the desperate need for modern bridges and highways. One of Maroun's misleading television advertisements cynically claimed that money spent on the bridge could be better used elsewhere. The ad showed one of the most dilapidated overpasses in existence, near the old Detroit railroad terminal, a shameful reminder of a collapsing infrastructure.

Modern techniques

Modern construction techniques can be employed today to build a new road system. At one time, dynamite and thousands of men

constructed marvels of their day through some of the most treacherous terrain in America. Today, the powers that be in the US cannot or will not find the money to construct a series of dykes to protect a major urban center such as New Orleans from a hurricane.

In China a modern highway has been constructed through the Tarim Desert basin in Xinjiang Province. The Taklamakan Desert Highway runs through 500 km of what was once the southern end of the old Silk Road, which took forty days to cross by camel. This highway traverses sand dunes up to 30 feet in height, which constantly shift due to high winds. Many new methods were developed to provide a solid base and the landscape is anchored by an extensive terrace of trees on each side, continuously irrigated. (See "China pushes into Central Asia for oil and gas".)

By contrast, I-75 from Detroit's downriver area to the Michigan-Ohio state line is an on-going 35-mile construction project. Extensive wetlands and a sandy soil base along the Lake Erie shoreline have never been adequately conquered by previous construction techniques, let alone forward-thinking innovation. One can take for granted that declining state and federal revenues lie behind the minimal and inadequate repairs. The result is an incredibly choppy road that heaves up and down at every segment, making repair shops a great deal of money in suspension repairs. Every few years the stretch of highway is torn up again and rebuilt using the same outdated methods and materials.

A vast rebuilding project in the United States is unthinkable under the existing social and political system. Trillions of dollars are needed, which instead go to fight neo-colonial wars or line the pockets of the bankers.

More than half a century has passed since the Eisenhower administration interstate highway project was completed, and today's efforts are simply a Band-Aid compared to what is needed. A modern and efficient transportation system, utilizing trains, roadways, and bridges to meet the needs of the 21st century, is only realizable under a workers' socialist government where social equality and human need are paramount.



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