

The Detroit News

Building a bridge to Detroit's future

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As the elected state representative for Southwest Detroit from 2003-2008, I probably spent more time working on issues related to border crossings between Detroit and Windsor (both existing and planned) than any other policy issue.

My office worked to inform residents about the new proposed bridge crossing, research issues, attend public hearings, and file comments to the federal Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), not to mention the

actual state legislative issues involved like increasing eminent domain protections for renters, creating a statewide supply chain commission, and fighting language restricting the project in various transportation appropriations bills.

Without City Council districts, there simply was no other elected official at the time that was willing to do much more than take a broad pro- or con- stance on this important issue to our regional economy.

Moreover, in the wake of term-limits, it was hard to even find another state legislative colleague who could explain the federal EIS process, much less articulate the incredible volume of bi-national surface trade done between Detroit and Windsor and how Windsor's surface streets served as a choke-point to these critical international trade routes.

The positive regional economic case for enhanced border infrastructure, including a new bridge, is well established.

The issue currently being debated by the Detroit City Council, Mayor Mike Duggan, the state and others relates to the investments, if any, that will be made in the community surrounding the bridge. Too often the players and the media have devolved this important conversation into a farce, portraying the community as a group of radical ogressives demanding a new Socialist construct of government.

Unfortunately, these caricatures prevent honest and constructive dialogue and collaboration that needs to occur.

In the early days of consideration of this project, I went door-to-door in Delray and helped explain the new bridge to residents, helping to organize the Southwest Detroit Community Benefits Coalition. What was clear was that some Delray residents welcomed the opportunity to be relocated. Others were steadfast in their opposition to a new bridge. And still others wanted to work to see how the neighborhood could co-exist with a new bridge.

Delray residents and the Community Benefits Coalition deserve incredible praise and respect for embracing a future that can include a new bridge in their community. These are folks who have not sought to derail the process by shutting down deliberation or engaging in simple “Not In My Back Yard” (NIMBY) tactics.

Rather, they have invested thousands of hours of their personal time to craft a vision for how the community can co-exist with what is likely to be the world’s most valuable border crossing.

Their vision does not include an unrealistic, pie-in-the-sky list of demands such as new schools, retail shops, mass transit options, high-end residential or local investments more than the national average for such projects, but includes critical elements that will indeed seek to offset some of the negative impacts, such as pollution, noise, freeway exits being closed, construction, truck traffic, not to mention relocation of some 600 residents.

As someone who lives just blocks from the Ambassador Bridge, the negative impacts of living near the world’s most valuable border crossing are real.

The requests of the Community Benefits Coalition include having a seat at the decision-making table about the local operating and design issues; jobs and training for local residents; modest home repair programs; green space buffers around the facility; fair treatment regarding eminent domain buyouts; and adoption of basic diesel emission reduction programs. While bridge planners have sought to include some of their most basic concerns in the plaza location and layout, there still has been little, if any, tangible and firm public commitment to address the community vision.

It’s time that our leaders step into the vision that Detroit Future City offers by taking advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime bridge investment and formalizing a firm plan to build local economic opportunity and to minimize negative local impacts.

Steve Tobocman is a former state representative (2003-2008) from the southwest portion of Detroit and was House Majority Floor Leader in 2007-2008.