

# State Transportation Director Gloria Jeff Challenges Bridge Authority Responsibilities

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Ms. Jeff, as a department head, reports to Governor Jennifer Granholm.

A year ago, Ms. Jeff moved \$25 million that was being invested by the Authority to the State Treasurer. Her reasoning was that the State Treasurer is the treasurer of the Bridge Authority. "She just moved the money over," said Bridge Authority Chairman Bill Gnodtke.

The Bridge is completely self-funding and MDOT does not supply funds for the bridge, according to Mr. Gnodtke. The Authority funds bridge maintenance and employee wages and benefits.

"It is absolutely 100 percent self-sufficient," he said.

The Authority, with its independent status from state departments, defined in statutes as a Type One Transfer, has benefited from relative independence from the political pressures of state budgets. The Authority is a bipartisan board whose members are appointed by the Governor for six year terms and has operated under a congenial, but somewhat autonomous, relationship with the Michigan Department of Transportation.

Now, Ms. Jeff, armed with an Attorney General's opinion she will not make public, wants to greatly diminish the authority of the Mackinac Bridge Authority, say some present and former board members, and move most decision making to Lansing and the Department of Transportation.

"My real fear is this will put the Bridge in the same predicament as

it has put Michigan roads, which are the third worst in the United States," said Mr. Guastello.

"We can keep butting heads on this," Ms. Jeff told the Authority last week, standing firm in her jurisdiction. "I understand that there are members of the board who disagree with the statement of the Attorney General and don't believe the Attorney General is right in saying that there was a change in the status of the Mackinac Bridge Authority. It is not an independent entity and is part of the executive branch of state government. In that capacity, the department of transportation has a responsibility for operation and maintenance."

"The AG opinion being referred to frequently is an internal MDOT document," Bob Felt later told *The St. Ignace News*. Mr. Felt is a Communications Specialist for MDOT. "There are no plans to share it publicly," he said.

Mr. Guastello is not impressed. "Informal opinions are not binding," he said, "and she uses it for a power grab. If she's so confident in the opinion, why isn't she releasing it? She has a unique interpretation different from every other MDOT director for the last 50 years."

While hesitant to stir the pot in public last week on Mackinac Island, Authority members have become more outspoken as the ramifications of her actions sink in. Near the end of the August 12 meeting, Director Jeff had proposed a retreat in which she and other board members could work on building a better relationship and understanding with the help of a facilitator, but Chairman Gnodtke said he and board member Murray Wikol would poll other members first, to get a consensus as to how the confrontations would be resolved.

"It is our intention to continue to operate as we have, and we are not going to back off on the business of the Authority," he said this week. "Individual members on the Authority have expressed a willingness and interest in exploring ways to re-establish the historical role of the Mackinac Bridge Authority."

"I think it is a bureaucratic power grab on the part of Gloria Jeff," said Jon "Jack" LaSalle of Marquette, former 10-year Authority member who later spoke with *The Saint Ignace News*. When

Mr. LaSalle was appointed to the Authority for the first time in 1986, he said, he was told by long-time Chairman Charles Fisher that the board isn't about Democrats or

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— Thomas Guastello, former board member, Michigan state representative and state senator

Republicans. Mr. Fisher told him the board was there to look after the Bridge. Mr. LaSalle said during his tenure, he has never seen partisanship as a factor in the Board's decision-making process or in board member relationships.

Mr. LaSalle said Ms. Jeff told him last December that the Authority would be responsible for decisions regarding raising, lowering, or leaving Bridge fares as is, and nothing else. He said several governors have looked at the autonomous structure of the Mackinac Bridge Authority and decided they would leave it as it was.

"The Mackinac Bridge is not just a five mile road," said Mr. LaSalle. "It's a very special road with unique aspects. The board was assigned to protect it."

"I've heard nothing out of Governor Granholm's office," he continued. "As far as I know, this is a Gloria Jeff thing." He said he asked Ms. Jeff what problem she was attempting to fix by forcing the change in responsibility, but he never got an answer.

"I think that this is an error that comes from MDOT, not the Governor's office," he opined. "Ultimately, it will have to be rectified by the Governor."

Leaving some room for reflection, Governor Granholm's press secretary, Elizabeth Boyd, had the following to say Tuesday, August 23, when asked for a comment: "The Mackinac Bridge is a Michigan treasure and, at the end of

the day, we know everyone wants to do what's best for the bridge and the state of Michigan."

Chairman Gnodtke likened the current relationship between the Mackinac Bridge Authority and Ms. Jeff to a marriage where the wife has the checkbook and the husband as the bank balance. The husband won't tell the wife how much is in the account, and she won't tell her husband what checks she has written.

At Friday's board meeting, Ms. Jeff pulled the annual engineering survey report from the agenda and told the Authority that a summary of the report would be made available to Authority members at her discretion. Representatives of the company contracted for the survey, which inspects the bridge for structural soundness, were told not to attend the meeting. Such matters were of no concern to the Authority, she said.

Her office later told *The St. Ignace News* the decision is based on security concerns relating to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Reports have been made available to the Authority and the public since the attacks and up until this year.

Ms. Jeff told the MBA that as the state transportation director, she responsible for the oversight of the Mackinac Bridge. She referred to the unspecified Attorney General opinion about responsibilities of the board as the basis for her instruction that the bridge inspection report be removed from the meeting's agenda.

"The issue of the physical condition of the Bridge is an operational item that MDOT has responsibility for," she said. "It is our opinion that we will provide you with information on the condition of the physical situation, but it is our discretion on who and how that occurs."

She noted that she was speaking as a member of the board and also as the director of the department of transportation.

Mr. Felt, the MDOT communications specialist, said, "The MBA board is well aware of all of the concerns regarding the Bridge since September 11." He said the inspection reports are not read publicly and they cannot be obtained through the Freedom of Information Act for security reasons. "The bridge is a high profile operation; to ensure a safe and secure crossing, again, that information will not be shared, nor has it been openly discussed recently," he said.

Last year during the August meeting on Mackinac Island, the inspection report was presented to the board.

In April, the Authority was given a report on Insurance Risk Assessment by the Department of Management and Budget with the

recommendation that the Authority set up a restricted self-insurance fund by setting aside \$200,000 annually, which is approximately the same amount the Authority was paying in premiums for insurance coverage annually. For small losses, the Authority could use the restricted fund. For large losses that exceed the fund's balance, MDOT would reimburse the Authority with general road and bridge funds. This recommendation was based on the loss history of the Authority being low.

Current insurance policies are set to expire on September 1. The insurance assessment revealed there was some dual coverage and, through self-insurance, the Authority could save more than \$220,000 before the annual contri-

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## US-2 Safety

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radio announcements have been used to increase safety awareness.

Captain Myles McCormack, commander of the Michigan State Police 8th District (Upper Peninsula), said there has been only one fatality on US-2 since the program started, though he doesn't have a current accident total. That fatality was the result of a driver falling asleep.

"The program has gone extremely well, in our opinion," he said. "We've worked with county and local law enforcement departments and, to date (August 18), we've made more than 2,000 traffic stops and issued 1,800 citations. We believe that, at least in the short term, we've slowed traffic."

Captain McCormack said speed studies would be conducted after the program to get more hard data on how much drivers have slowed down. During the fall, winter, and spring months, traffic patrols by units from St. Ignace, Newberry, Manistique, and Gladstone will monitor the highway at increased levels from past years during comparative months. The SABRE program will be funded for the next two to four summers.

"We've heard a lot of comments that most motorists are pleased with the increased police presence," concluded Mr. Batchelder, "and that means a lot."

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