

Michigan Politics

By George Weeks



Granholt, MBA To Reach Accord

Governor Jennifer Granholm is not as tone deaf as I thought she was becoming to what has made the Mackinac Bridge and the Mackinac Island State Park Commission tick so successfully for so long.

I was befuddled when her budget cut out general fund support of the park and raised the prospect of charging a landing fee on the island. Then her administration made what came across, as it was ineptly initially presented, as a Lansing power grab of prime chores of the Mackinac Bridge Authority (MBA).

But Granholm, in a rather extraordinary conference call I had Friday with her and Mackinac Bridge Authority Chairman Bill Gnodtke of Charlevoix, said they had reached agreement in principle "to clarify and enforce the line of authority" of the unique agency that manages "a bridge that is a jewel and a gem in our system."

The authority, thanks to wisdom of the Legislature, is rare in that it is a largely autonomous "Type I" agency within the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT), just as the Mackinac Island State Park Commission is Type I within the Department of History, Arts and Libraries (HAL).

Republican Gnodtke, who last month bristled at some takeover moves by MDOT Director Gloria Jeff on insurance contracts, investment policies, and other issues, said: "What happened, happened. We'd rather (now) focus on the future."

Gnodtke, longtime ally of then-Gov. John Engler, said he is now confident "the governor is not trying to micromanage the bridge at all."

But Gnodtke said he would have to consult with the other five members of the authority before commenting on specifics of the agreement that had been worked out by Gnodtke and Granholm Legal Counsel Kelly Keenan, who also was at the conference call.

Granholm Press Secretary Liz Boyd arranged the call in unusual response to my question of whether Granholm knew in advance, and approved of, the moves that MDOT Director Jeff took to take over some authority responsibilities.

Granholm said: "I found about this last week."

After Granholm left the line, Boyd said steps that were taken by Jeff reflect Granholm's "zeal to find money savings wherever she can."

MDOT said that by taking a more active role in overseeing operations and finances of the bridge, it "will result in the anticipated savings of almost \$4 million in taxpayer funds over the next fifteen years."

How actively MDOT's pitch for a bigger role will be pursued remains to be seen. But Granholm appears to have softened MDOT's hardball stance. Gnodtke is not one

to cave.

Northern Michigan lawmakers have been puzzled by the administration-authority tango. Sen. Jason Allen, R-Traverse City, chairman of the Senate Commerce & Labor Committee, called a Sept. 1 St. Ignace town hall meeting on the "tug of war" between MDOT and the authority.

At the meeting, according to extensive coverage by *The St. Ignace News*, MBA member Barbara Brown, a Granholm appointee (and granddaughter of the late U.S. Sen. Prentiss M. Brown, the first MBA chairman and driving force behind building of the bridge) said Granholm "has absolutely no desire to take away" MBA's authority.

But Allen, in a Sept. 8 letter to Granholm, said Director Jeff, after reassuring opening remarks at the meeting, "gave a presentation which outlined how and why MDOT has taken over all of the MBA's powers, with the exception of establishing tolls and managing special events."

Rep. Kevin Elsenheimer, R-Bellaire, said of the meeting: "I'm not sure if someone is parsing words or not, but it sounds to me as this is a power grab." Other lawmakers at the meeting included Sen. Mike Prusi, D-Ishpeming, and Reps. Tom Caspersen, R-Escanaba, and Gary McDowell, D-Rudyard.

After what Elsenheimer referred to as confusing "Lansing-speak," Granholm now has moved forward with some forceful damage control.

What, now, of Granholm's tiff with the Mackinac Island State Park over her embrace of the Department of Natural Resources recommendation (impractical in my view, given the unique park-municipal mix on the island), that the park should charge entrance fees to replace the \$1.5 million that it now gets from the general fund?

This was not resolved in the tentative budget agreement announced Friday by Granholm and GOP legislative leaders--"a fair compromise," as cited by Senate Majority Leader Ken Sikkema, R-Wyoming.

The island issue, say Granholm disciples, will be resolved in Senate-House conference committees. A good bet is that instead of taking a \$1.5 million hit, the island park will be cut not much more than \$200,000. That's about what the park said it could raise by increasing other fees and tapping other sources.

Issues involving Mighty Mac and Mackinac Island are hardly on the front burner in Lansing in the closing days of the current fiscal year. But Granholm recognizes they have a special place on the Michigan scene and is wisely honing moves put in motion down the line in her administration.

George Weeks is the political columnist for The Detroit News and is syndicated by Superior Features.

3 Hendricks Twp. Men Aid in Hurricane Relief Effort

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involved in the relief effort to fly in the area.

At one point, the AWAX reported that shooting had broken out near a hospital in New Orleans. Everyone was ordered to leave the area.

On Saturday, the Kaspers found themselves near downtown New Orleans, a scene of near chaos where people scrambled to board buses.

"Imagine half the trees from Escanaba to St. Ignace blown down. It was something like that, as if there were nothing left south of Moran to the lake."

— Tim Nelson,
Hendricks Twp.

"If you tried to land a helicopter in many areas, it would get mobbed," Mr. Kasper said. "People wanted out of there. But with our 900 pounds of useful capacity, it made more sense to fly supplies in to help keep people alive than to fly people out of there."

Looking back on last week, Dave Kasper has mixed feelings about relief efforts.

"The military was slow," he said. "But you've got to understand that materials are spread out all over the country. There's a way to do it right. When the Army got there, though, things happened really fast."

On the other hand, Mr. Kasper also related a series of incidents which he said revealed questionable priorities.

"There was an area of stilt houses in Lake Pontchartrain where kids were stranded," he said. "A helicopter with reporters on it came in, got their story, and then just left them there."

The journalists' pilot notified the Kaspers, and Brian Kasper delivered supplies to them. According to Mr. Kasper, the youths had suffered lacerations.

Commenting on relief organizations in general, Dave Kasper described efforts as "minimal at best."

"If it wasn't for the military throwing supplies down to the ground," he said, "I don't know



Devastated areas of New Orleans as seen from the Kaspers' helicopter.

what would have happened."

Dave and Brian Kasper were not the only area residents to aid in relief efforts or to express mixed feelings concerning the effectiveness of relief organizations.

"I didn't see anyone from FEMA down there," said Tim Nelson, a fireman and first responder with the Hendricks Township Fire Department, and a member of North Tree Fire International, a California based fire department composed of specialists from all over the United States.

"On the third or fourth day, we entered a NASA base," he said. "They had 100 semis loaded with food and supplies. People there asked us, 'Are you from FEMA?' and told us they wouldn't do anything with their supplies until they had FEMA's permission. It was time for action," he said, "not the time to wait for pencil pushers or to have a meeting."

"I have a feeling some people may get fired over this," he added, "but I'm confident the president will get to the bottom of it and coordinate things very soon."

For six days, Mr. Nelson worked in the affected area, setting up staging areas to place generators for use by fire departments, police departments, retire-

ment homes, and hospitals.

Unlike the Kaspers, Mr. Nelson worked on the ground and saw a different side of the aftermath.

"The only out-of-town relief workers I saw were from the Red Cross," he said. "Most of the help for victims came from residents helping each other. Local fire and police were so tapped out. They worked 24 hours a day and slept where they worked. They were overwhelmed, but they were doing the job."

Not only was the toll on human beings difficult to witness, but Mr. Nelson was struck by the pets lost or abandoned in the aftermath of the hurricane.

"A lot of them had leashes or chains around their necks," he said. "You could tell they belonged to someone."

Mr. Nelson worked near Biloxi, Mississippi, an area that endured the worst of the tidal surge, where he saw debris such as clothes and mattresses 15 feet up in the trees.

"There were houses blown over," he said. "In some areas where houses had been, there was nothing left."

"Imagine half the trees from Escanaba to St. Ignace blown down. It was something like that, as if there were nothing left south of Moran to the lake."

Mr. Nelson did not witness malicious looting. What he did see were desperate people gathering needed supplies. According to him, things got worse as days went on.

Eventually, Mr. Nelson and his crew made their way to New Orleans. There, they were instructed not to enter the city. He used a cellular telephone to call Dave Kasper, his colleague on the Hendricks Township Fire Department. To his amazement, Mr. Kasper was nearby. After days of turmoil, Tim Nelson, Dave Kasper, and Brian Kasper made their way back to Michigan.

"I couldn't believe the U.S. could do so well at helping people all over the world," Mr. Nelson said, "but we were disorganized at helping our own."

According to Dave Kasper, the most tragic aspect of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina were the senseless actions of some of the people.

"Shooting at rescue operations was the most ignorant thing I've ever seen," he said. "It was also frustrating to see the media scare the rest of the U.S. by showing only the negative, not the positive things going on."

"On my way home," said Mr. Nelson, "I wrote the bad things and the good things down in my journal. It was incredible to see how one woman down there took care of umpteen number of people. There were a lot of people like that."

Mr. Kasper agreed.

"The best thing out of all of this was seeing people willing to help each other, people they didn't even know."

After experiencing the devastation to the south, Mr. Kasper thinks the best thing Michigan people can do to help is to take up donations for victims. He insists, however, that those who do so find reputable organizations for the delivery of funds. Mr. Nelson suggests going through the Red Cross.

Today, the Kasper helicopter sits back on its landing pad in Gaylord. Dave Kasper says it's a relief to be home where everyone knows their neighbors.

"This event makes me think of the potential disasters we could have here," he said. "We need to use our minds. There are inexpensive ways we could prepare for our own worst case scenario."

Right to Life Banquet Planned for October 10

St. Ignace Right to Life will host its 8th Annual Banquet for Life Monday, October 10, at 6 p.m. at Little Bear East Community Center. Dinner will be served at 6:30 p.m. The speaker will be Mark Blocher, a nationally known bioethics speaker and writer.

Tickets for the banquet cost \$20 each and reservations are required by October 1. For more information, call MariAn Huhn at 643-9238 or Gladly Tamlyn at 643-8292.

George J. Theut
Mackinac County Probate
Judge, retired
St. Ignace

Letters to the Editor

Don't Bring Down Bridge With Control Battle

To the Editor:

On September 1, I attended the meeting at the Little Bear East Arena which had been convened to discuss the latest move by the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) to wrest responsibilities from the Mackinac Bridge Authority (MBA). I was extremely pleased to see such a large public turnout and equally pleased to see legislative, MDOT, and MBA contingents. There were a number of statements made by MDOT director, Gloria Jeff, that gave me reason to question MDOT's motivation in this matter. I submit the following:

1. Ms. Jeff stated that it was "...not MDOT's intent to take over the Mackinac Bridge." The word "intent" was used, or should I say "over-used" to the point that it left this writer with the feeling that a take-over was exactly what was intended.

2. Ms. Jeff also was very quick to point out that the changes made would generate a savings of \$4.5 million over 15 years. This savings is the amount that would have been paid out to an insurer to actually insure the bridge, as opposed to MDOT's plan to self-insure, which in effect, is akin to playing Russian roulette. Hats off to Mayor Dodson for pointing out the effects of self-insurance as witnessed by the total loss of the Father Marquette Museum more than six years ago, and the lack of state funds to replace this state historic treasure.

3. Ms. Jeff made a point of stating that the \$25 million transferred to the Department of Treasury and under the control of MDOT, was

"fire-walled" so that those funds could only be used for Mackinac Bridge expenses. Twenty minutes later when queried as to why the responsibilities of the MBA were transferred to MDOT after 50 years, she stated that it was necessary, in part due to the "budget problems" currently faced by the state. Now I ask, if the funds are "fire-walled" and set aside exclusively for the MBA, how could those funds have anything to do with alleviating state budget woes, unless they were co-mingled in the General Fund? It appears to me that someone has misrepresented MDOT's intent.

After listening to Ms. Jeff's explanation of the circumstances surrounding this takeover, I find it hard to believe that she or MDOT have anything in mind other than taking control of the funds. The savings portrayed by Ms. Jeff seem to be a stretch at best and only used to justify the transfer. The \$4.5 million cannot be viewed as a savings, as one claim could wipe it out. Ms.

Jeff said that the reason for self-insuring was based on the fact that the bridge had only paid out \$1.5 million in 47 years. I'm sure there were people at the federal level saying that they didn't need to spend money on higher and stronger levies because New Orleans had never had a hurricane or a storm before that produced significant damage.

When the state took over control of the Detroit school system, it made sense, owing to the mishandling and abuse of public monies, but I don't see any similarities here. In fact, I see just the opposite. If Treasury can invest the funds and increase or even retain the same level of return as the private investment firm, then let them do so. But don't strip the MBA of its power and responsibilities and leave it as just a paper tiger. The bridge stands as both a physical and symbolic unifier. Let's not bring it down with a battle for control.

Mike Lilliquist
St. Ignace

Judge Roberts Recommended

To the Editor:

The nomination of Judge John Roberts to the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court to replace Chief Justice Rehnquist is an excellent choice. The record of Judge John Roberts has been fairly set out in the national media and indicates a judge who is well respected by members of the bar, the public, and other judges. The American Bar Association rated him "well qualified," their highest rating. Judge Roberts is no stranger

to the United States Supreme Court as he was a law clerk for then Justice Rehnquist, and while in private practice argued 39 cases before the United States Supreme Court.

I would urge Michigan Senators Carl Levin and Debbie Stabenow to support his nomination as the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court.

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and Les Cheneaux Islands Weekly Wave

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The quotation under the flag of *The St. Ignace News* on Page 1 is from the 10 triads written by Dr. Fred Newton Scott, creator and teacher of the first continuous course in journalism in the United States at the University of Michigan in 1890. The 10 triads are chiseled on the parapet of the Detroit News Building at 615 Lafayette Boulevard, Detroit. They were headed "Ideals of the Press" or "The Newspaper in a Free Society," and serve as a reminder of what a free press means to us.