

Truckers Seek Commuter Rate, Public Asks for Delayed Toll Hikes on Mackinac Bridge

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tourism in the Upper Peninsula and hurt the economy of northern Michigan.

Several groups are pushing for a gradual increase of the tolls through 2013, including the cities of St. Ignace and Sault Ste. Marie, the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians, and Chambers of Commerce and Visitors Bureaus from St. Ignace, Les Cheneaux, Sault Ste. Marie, and DeTour Village/ Drummond Island.

"We understand this bridge needs to be maintained," said St. Ignace City Manager Eric Dodson, "but as Michigan's icon, Michigan's icon needs to be supported by all of Michigan's people, from Sault Ste. Marie to Detroit to Grand Rapids to all of the folks traversing Michigan on their tourism ventures across our beautiful state."

Attending the hearings in St. Ignace, Mackinaw City, and Lansing were 135 people, 75 at St. Ignace, 48 at Mackinaw City, and 12 at Lansing. Of those, 38 people voiced opinions, although several hundred letters have been received on the matter, bridge officials said.

Former State Senator Walt North, who was executive secretary

at the bridge from 1983 to 1992, recalled legislation introduced in 2003 by former State Representative Scott Shackleton and State Senator Jason Allen during the last bridge fare increase proposal. The bridge roadway upkeep, said Mr. North, is included in funds the federal government sends to the state each year for maintenance of the interstate highway system, and the legislation sought to earmark more than \$5 million of those funds for the bridge.

"If that \$5 million-plus was coming into the Bridge Authority, no increase in tolls would be necessary."

— Walter North,
Former State Senator
and MBA Secretary

"If that \$5 million-plus was coming into the Bridge Authority," Mr. North said, "no increase in tolls would be necessary."

The funding was approved by the legislature that year, but Governor Jennifer Granholm vetoed it.

The legislation introduced last Thursday by Senator Allen is a similar bill, seeking no less than \$5.25 million annually to be earmarked for capital improvements on the bridge. The bill proposes the funding start with the state's fiscal year beginning October 1, 2008.

Since its introduction last week, Senate Bill 981 has been referred to the Committee on Commerce and Tourism, which is chaired by Senator Allen. The bill is expected



Seventy-five people attend the Mackinac Bridge public hearing on the proposed fare increase Tuesday, December 4, at Little Bear East Arena and Community Center in St. Ignace. Members of the Mackinac Bridge Authority listened as 17 residents took the microphone, offering their opinions. Fred Dandona (left, standing), owner of the St. Ignace KOA Campground, is concerned campers may not cross the bridge with the increase in the toll. Robert Parsons (standing), public involvement and hearings officer for the Bureau of Transportation Planning at the Michigan Department of Transportation, moderated the event.

to be brought before the full Senate by Thursday, December 13, Joe Agostinelli, a legislative aide for Senator Allen, told *The St. Ignace News* December 8.

"It's time for the state to play a greater role," said Senator Allen in a prepared statement, "and become a partner in preserving and maintaining the bridge."

Bridge Authority Chairman Bill Gnodtke told *The St. Ignace News* that such funding, if approved, would not be available until next year.

"We can't wait," he said. "If it comes, we can always adjust the toll."

Commercial haulers asked during the public hearings for a commuter rate for the trucking industry. The Authority offers a commuter discount to passenger vehicles, although it has yet to say who will be eligible for such a discount after January 1.

Tom Barnes, executive director of the Michigan Association of Timbersmen, spoke for companies that budget \$85,000 to \$168,000

each year for their trucks to cross the bridge. The proposed toll increase, he said, would cost each of those companies an additional \$29,000 to \$128,000 a year.

"We need to find other alternatives," said Mr. Barnes, who attended all three hearings. "Can there be a commuter rate for commercial traffic?"

The Bridge Authority is in the process of developing its definition of a commuter, said Mr. Gnodtke during the Mackinaw City meeting when asked about the commuter program by Steve Maniaci of Brutus. The Authority is researching commuter programs at other

bridges. Some bridges define a commuter by a geographic area or by a usage rate, and others use a combination of both. The board, he said, will be discussing options to determine which will work best at the Mackinac Bridge before making a final decision about who qualifies for the discount.

Two rate increase options are being proposed by the Authority and were the subject of the hearings. Authority members now say a combination of the two proposals is likely to be adopted at a special board meeting December 21 in Detroit.

Proposal A would increase the bridge toll to \$4 for a one-way crossing of a passenger vehicle. The plan is an immediate 60% increase in the toll. The commuter rate would increase by 50¢ to \$2 per crossing, and the cost per axle for other vehicles would be raised from \$3 to \$5.

Proposal B offers an incremental rate hike, starting with a 20% increase in the toll, for a total of \$3 for a one-way trip for a passenger vehicle. The commuter rate would remain unchanged and other vehicles would increase from \$3 per axle to \$4 per axle. By 2013, the crossing rate for a vehicle would rise to \$4, the commuter rate would increase to \$2, and \$5 would be charged per axle for all other vehicles. The Bridge Authority would sell bonds to supplement the toll revenue needed for upcoming major bridge projects.

The gubernatorial appointees who serve on the Authority say they need to raise the toll to pay for a \$40

*Please turn to page 5

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

School Parking Lot Should Be Concern for Parents, Police

To the Editor:

We have a situation in the St. Ignace Schools parking lot that should be addressed by the public and I hope law enforcement. The school system has implemented measures to make very easy and simple the dropping off and picking up of children. All it needs is for parents to cooperate. The parking lot is a "beehive" in the morning and at the end of the day. I have seen more than a few parents in a "road rage" mode, which makes for a very dangerous situation, especially in adverse weather. Perhaps a few tickets issued by law enforcement would see a change.

The school has made it quite simple for parents who are able to follow rules and road signs. The drop off line is just what it says it is. It would go along very smoothly if parents would only obey the rules. If you choose to walk your child into school, that's fine. Do it from the parking space provided for it. Most parents do. I am amazed at the few who will be in the drop off line, with cars ahead and behind them, who will suddenly stop, get out of their car, and walk their child into school! We who are behind them are not happy. We have to try and pull around this fool, and, believe me, it's very dangerous! I was in this drop off line with my grandchild when this happened. There were cars ahead of me and behind me. Cars and trucks along side of me already trying to get by. It's a very tense situation. A truck nearly broadsided me trying to get around this parked car. The car ahead of me had tried to pull out of line, this truck who had already pulled out of line had to slam on his brakes, and nearly got my car! Very, very tense situation.

One day someone is going to get killed or hurt because a few parents feel they don't have to obey the rules.

Every parent and grandparent should be concerned. Please take the time to obey the rules before someone is hurt.

Joan Bradford
Moran

Make Problem of Low Great Lakes Levels Front Page News

To the Editor:

I have been a regular reader of *The St. Ignace News* since 1963. I have learned much about the northern Michigan area from this well-written newspaper.

As a property owner and part-time resident, I have observed the fluctuations of the Great Lakes levels. From what I understand, the lake levels go through a normal fluctuation. At present, we are in an up cycle from a previous low, but instead of having an increase in lake level, we are experiencing a continued decline. This decline has been attributed in large part to the dredging of the St. Clair River and thereby significant drainage of Lake Huron and the Georgian Bay area. In addition, a decrease in snow accumulation in Canada has meant less water draining into the Great Lakes. In the past several years, we have experienced a decline in rainfall. A warming of the climate has produced increased temperatures in the lake water and, therefore, an increase in water evaporation.

I have just described a current ongoing phenomenon in the Great Lakes region that has been a concern for almost a decade. It is because of this serious decline in Great Lake water levels that I am wondering why you published the article about the Great Lakes Governors Priority on page 13 of the November 29 edition of *The St. Ignace News*. It was placed at the bottom right hand corner of the page, following a large article on pre-construction of the Mackinac Bridge and photographs for an historical book. The article about the governors speaks about a very present problem we are all facing.

I encourage you to make the Great Lakes water levels a major priority and front page news in future issues of *The St. Ignace News*. *The St. Ignace News* covers historical events very well. I urge you to turn your attention with regards to the past to the issue of lake levels so that we can gain an understanding of the current situation and predictions for future well-being of the Great Lakes.

Martha S. Haines
Sewickley, Pennsylvania

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Letters:

All responsible letters will be considered for publication and may be edited. They must be signed and a telephone number must be included for verification. Personal thank-you notes, personal attacks against other people, form letters, and letters promoting political candidates are not accepted, although letters for or against ballot proposals are welcome.

Obituaries:

The St. Ignace News maintains a policy of not charging for obituaries and we do often add information or rewrite them for clarity and reader interest. Obituaries that the family wants published exactly as submitted can be placed in the newspaper for \$75. Photographs are welcome at no charge.

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Weddings with photographs are published without charge within 45 days of the ceremony. After 45 days, a photograph can be included for \$35.00.

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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.

Michigan Politics

By
George Weeks



Natural Resources Need Granholm's Attention

There's a tentative \$5 million deal to supplement the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) budget and avoid immediate need for the hike in hunting and fishing fees that that the Legislature has refused to enact.

But it's a one-time move that does not address the need to assure adequate funding to conserve and protect Michigan's natural resources.

Representative Joel Sheltrown (D-West Branch), chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, said House leaders and Governor Jennifer Granholm, who supported the fee hikes, have agreed to tap the general fund to supplement DNR funding and avoid further layoffs.

While Granholm would avoid having to go to the mat for fee hikes, administration officials say details have yet to be completed. Legislative approval is likely, but not assured.

If there's any fight left in the beleaguered governor after her long and bitter struggle to pass a budget, she should use it to assure adequate long-term funding.

It's inadequate now. The future is bleak if the Legislature and the governor fail to meet needs, and to face up to consequences of warnings voiced across the state by Director Becky Humphries of the Department of Natural Resources.

"Humphries sees conservation disaster looming," the Charlevoix-based *North Woods Call* headlined in citing a one-third cut in wildlife staff; law enforcement down from 190 to 141; fisheries down from 270 to 160.

The *Call*, which I long ago dubbed "Mother Nature's Watchdog," said:

"Michigan ranks at the bottom in state financial support for conservation, though it has more freshwater than any other state and more state forest land than any other Eastern state."

The watchdog is barking up the right tree in calling for Granholm in her second term to deliver on pledges made when she first sought the office.

"For starters" her call for reconstituting a full service DNR, which lost its environmental protection responsibilities when then-Governor John Engler created the Department of Environmental

Quality (DEQ), which in that administration had a business tilt.

I asked Granholm if she still tilts toward a single agency.

"No" – unless there "is a compelling reason" that she does not now see.

Since her position of eight years ago, "now that it has been in place so long, the systems themselves have adjusted, and adjusted pretty well. So I am not sure that the recombination would...I know it wouldn't get much savings at all – and I think it might detract from the expertise that each agency brings," she said. She contends her cabinet system fosters DNR-DEQ coordination where needed.

During budget talks last year, an idea was floated to combine all resource agencies, including the Department of Agriculture. Granholm wisely rejected it. Agriculture needs a clear voice.

While, in my view, re-integration of DNR's pre-Engler responsibilities still makes sense, the more immediate need is winning voter approval of a what Humphries described to the *Call* as a "permanent, untouchable" fund to support natural resources.

She told the *Petoskey News-Review*: "We're hopeful that we'll be able to come up with some long-term, stable funding source for natural resource management because we've certainly taken reductions from the general fund over the last decade. It's been substantial."

The general fund once contributed about 25% of the DNR budget. Of late, it has been single digits.

Sheltrown is drafting legislation to permanently dedicate a portion of the sales tax paid on sporting goods to conservation funding.

Meanwhile, here's hoping Granholm's State of the State message next month will include a ringing call for action on assuring adequate and stable funding to conserve and protect precious resources for enjoyment of all.

Leadership is needed. Sisterhood with Mother Nature.

George Weeks retired last year after 22 years as political columnist for The Detroit News. His weekly Michigan Politics column is syndicated by Superior Features.