

Straits Community Anxiously Awaits Bridge Commuter Fare Decision

By Karen Gould and Ryan Schlehber

Area residents awaiting a December 21 Mackinac Bridge Authority decision on bridge fare hikes are now worried about how the Authority is going to select who will be eligible for reduced commuter fares.

An increase in the toll to travel between the state's two peninsulas is scheduled for January 1, although the Authority has not yet decided if it will raise the toll by 20%, 60%, or somewhere between. A 50¢ commuter fare increase to \$2 is also on the table, but the Authority has not decided who will qualify for it. It contends that the old commuter token system was abused and that it lost too much money on it, and it is investigating how a new debit card commuter system can be made less vulnerable to abuse. To do that, it is looking at other toll bridges for ideas.

Fare increases, it says, are needed for painting and deck replacement, and it hopes to come to a decision about tolls and commuters at a meeting Friday, December 21, in Detroit.

In the meantime, people who live, visit, and work in this area have their own ideas about how the upcoming decision will impact their travels, and in some cases, their daily lives. They also wonder how the toll discounts, which up until now had been freely available to anyone who wanted them, may be restricted.

Geographical area, frequency of

Bridge Funding Bill Now Heads to State House

A bill to use \$5.25 million in road funding for capital improvements on the Mackinac Bridge passed the Michigan Senate Thursday, December 13, and is expected to be taken up by the House sometime after the holidays. The bill, sponsored by Senator Jason Allen (R, 37th), was approved pretty much along party lines, with 20 Republicans and one Democrat voting in favor and 15 Democrats voting against the measure.

Jim Barcia of Bay City was the lone Democrat to favor the legislation, which would provide at least \$5.25 million annually from the state Trunk Line Fund for capital improvement on the bridge, which the Michigan Department of Transportation uses elsewhere.

"The Mackinac Bridge is known throughout the nation as a beloved symbol of Michigan," said Senator Allen in a prepared statement. "It's more important than ever that we nurture and preserve this crown jewel. By making an investment now, we can continue to reap dividends for many years to come. It's time for the state to play a greater role and become a partner in preserving and maintaining the bridge."

Former state Senator Walter North testified earlier this month that the bridge roadway upkeep is included in funds the federal government sends to the state each year for maintenance of the Interstate highway system, and getting it for the Mackinac Bridge would eliminate the necessity to raise the bridge toll.

In the Democrat-controlled House, this area's representative, Democrat Gary McDowell of Rudyard, said he favors use of such funds over a toll increase and has encouraged the Mackinac Bridge Authority to request them.

He said in a December 11 message to the Les Cheneaux Chamber of Commerce, "I have strongly suggested to the Bridge Authority that it apply for federal funds before it imposes a toll increase. The state receives federal transportation funds that can be used for roads and bridges, including the Mackinac Bridge. The Mackinac Bridge Authority is entitled to apply for those funds and should be seeking those funds first before taking additional toll funds from our commuters and visitors."

Senator Allen's bill is similar to legislation proposed in 2003 during the last fare increase debate. Then, the legislation passed the House and Senate before it was vetoed by Governor Jennifer Granholm.

crossing, or willingness to make a significant deposit on the electronic commuter card are among factors being considered by the Mackinac Bridge Authority in determining who uses the discounts. Bridge fare for a passenger vehicle now stands at \$2.50 per crossing and is proposed to ultimately rise to \$4. The commuter rate is \$1.50 and is proposed to rise to \$2, so the impact of losing commuter status could be significant.

Area trucking companies say the

toll influences their business operations, the local hospital is concerned about travel costs for cancer patients, and school coaches say any toll increase will affect fundraising efforts and school budgets.

Al Visgar of Ortonville, a Chrysler engineer, is among those who travel to the Straits area with their families throughout the year. An avid hunter, he owns a cabin and property on Brevort

Lake and crosses the bridge at least 35 times a year. He considers himself a commuter, and wants to be eli-

gible for a discount.

He is disappointed that state legislators and leaders have not directed federal highway funds to the bridge.

"I believe the Bridge Authority was doing well at maintaining rates at the bridge and keeping operations going until our governor got involved," Mr. Visgar told *The St. Ignace News*. "I find it frustrating that the governor stole the [\$5 million in funding through Michigan Department of Transportation] and now they're charging more at the bridge."

"I think that's irresponsible," he said. "I think it's frustrating that the topic of increasing toll rates should even have to come up."

"When me and my family are up there, we spend a lot of time in St. Ignace and go over the bridge constantly to shop in Mackinaw City," he said. "I put a lot of my money

into that area, to the local businesses, and pay huge taxes to the state and for my property. I definitely consider myself a frequent commuter of the Mackinac Bridge."

Terri Burfield, gift shop manager at Kewadin Shores Casino and Hotel in St. Ignace, agrees commuters should be defined by frequency of crossings and should include those who live in the Straits area.

About 20% of the St. Ignace casino's workforce crosses the bridge to get to work.

Ms. Burfield, a full-time employee, drives 22 miles to the casino from Carp Lake, sometimes seven days a week. She is concerned that if workers do not qualify for the bridge's commuter rate discount, they may seek employment south of the bridge.

"I think there are a lot of workers who drive over the bridge that will not be able to afford \$8 a trip," she

said. The casino and its hotel employ 375 workers and, of those, 68 workers must cross the bridge to get to work, said Michelle Bouschor of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians, which operates the gaming facility.

Introducing a seasonal card, or a card with an expiration date, are among options being considered by the Authority in determining who uses the discount fare card. Under consideration is a four-county geographical restriction that would allow exceptions for frequent travelers. The four counties include Mackinac, Chippewa, Emmet, and Cheboygan. A possible exception clause is being considered for commuters outside of the area, based on a frequency rate of three or more crossings a week. The considerations were discussed in an Authority

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St. Ignace Girl Scouts Host Dinner With Santa



Four Girl Scout troops from St. Ignace hosted a pancake dinner with Santa and Mrs. Claus at McDonald's restaurant Wednesday, December 5. Girls from troops 104, 384, 72, and 340 attended, ranging in age from five years to 17. Pictured with Mr. and Mrs. Claus are (in front) Holly Beaudoin; (second row) Alyssa Gravell, Kelsey Will, Cameran Huffman, Rebecca LaLonde, Andrea Perry (standing); (back) Virginia Smith, Emily Hinsman, Dana Perry, and Savannah Smith. (Photograph by Abby LaLonde)

Smoking Causes Concern at City Skate Park

By Ryan Schlehber

Banning smoking and use of tobacco products at St. Ignace's city skate park, across from Little Bear East Arena and Community Center, is the easy part for the city. Enforcing it is where the difficulty lies, say members of the St. Ignace Recreation Advisory Committee, even though the police chief says he can do so if the city takes action.

The topic was discussed at length at the committee's meeting Wednesday, December 12, but the committee was only able to agree that the subject needs more discussion, and no action was taken.

The city implemented the Luce Mackinac Alger Schoolcraft Health Department's policy to ban smoking from public facilities in October 2006, prohibiting staff or visitors at city facilities from smoking and from using tobacco. Committee members now are discussing implementation of that same policy at the city's outdoor recreation areas, such as the skate park, similar to what the city's Downtown Development Authority has done at American Legion Park, by posting no smoking signs

near the playground.

Committee member Marianne Huskey asked if it is possible to ban smoking from the city's outdoor facilities and parks, and especially at the skate park, where she said many underage youths are using tobacco against state law.

"The board is aiming to take the concern to the local police," said Erica Mattson, who oversees operations of the city's Recreation Department and Little Bear East Arena and Community Center. "We don't want the skate park to have a bad reputation, and we certainly don't want parents restricting their children from the skate park because of the smoking concern."

City Police Chief Tim Matelski has noticed bigger problems at the skate park, such as fights, and deliberate destruction of skate park equipment by non-skaters. He has yet to see anyone at the park smoking or chewing, however, he said, "It's not like I sneak up on them incognito. They can see me coming and can put out or throw away something before I get there."

City police check the park a

couple of times a day, Chief Matelski said. Regarding smokers who are of legal age, he pointed out that the police cannot stop anyone 18 years old or older from smoking or chewing tobacco unless the city implements a no-tobacco-use policy and posts signs at the skate park.

Committee Chairman Don Gustafson said if the city council decides to implement such a policy for the skate park, then it should also include other outdoor city facilities such as Kiwanis Beach, the city park area near Dock 3, and at the Silver Mountain Ski Hill in St. Ignace Township, where the city operates the programs and a concession. Mr. Gustafson is also a city councilman and the high school principal.

The city's football and baseball fields at McCann have a policy that those who want to smoke or chew tobacco must be on the outside of the fence surrounding the fields.

The committee took no action at the meeting, however, members agreed that enforcing the city's smoking policy should be discussed further.

Board Decision on Dean, Tracy Reversed Again

Two Will Remain as Mackinaw City Planners

By Paul Gingras

On the advice of the village attorney, the Mackinaw City Planning Commission members Nancy Dean and Florence Tracy have been allowed to remain on the commission, despite a vote by the village council to remove them at its Thursday, December 6, meeting.

Village President Ronald Wallin requested a legal opinion regarding Council's vote after the decision.

Ms. Dean and Mrs. Tracy were nominated by Mr. Wallin in

November and were initially approved by the council. The council re-voted and removed them December 6, citing dissatisfaction with Mr. Wallin's methods of nominating planning commission members.

The decision of attorney Tom Evashkevski was received Wednesday, December 12, one day before the next planning commission meeting. The members stayed on the commission, and the meeting went smoothly, Village

Manager Jeff Lawson told *The St. Ignace News*.

Members discussed zoning revisions to limit building sizes in the B2 Zoning District along South Huron Avenue, with the goal of protecting the view of the Straits of Mackinac, he said.

The commission is also revising the village master plan, its park plan, and its capital improvement plan, a list of projects to be done over the next five years, Mr. Lawson added.

Upper Great Lakes Study Underway

Scientists Will Analyze Lake Superior's Flow at Soo Locks

By Amy Polk

Preliminary inspection of the St. Clair River as part of the Upper Great Lakes Study shows it has a rocky bottom that protects against erosion, scientists say. The riverbed was videotaped in early September to investigate the claim that abnormally low water levels in lakes Huron and Michigan are being caused by an eroded St. Clair River bed. Research is ongoing to learn more about erosion of the riverbed and sides, and how that may impact lake levels.

Scientists still have to determine whether the river bottom has always been rocky, or became that way because of previous erosion or mechanical dredging. The study will analyze 130 years of data on the river, including the composition of a cross section of riverbed material. The sediment study on the St. Clair riverbed was a tiny component of the five-year Upper Great Lakes Study, which was commissioned by the International Joint Commission (IJC).

"They shot 11 hours of video, and it showed the riverbed material is very large, so it would be very hard to move," said Ted Yuzyk, Canadian co-director of the Upper Great Lakes Study Board.

The video does not rule out earlier erosion there.

It does not seem like the St. Clair River bed is eroding now, he noted,

but asked, "How long did it take to get like that? Also, the velocity of flow along that type of material is much faster," plus, "the sides of the [shipping] channel are sand, and could be eroding."

The Ontario-based Georgian Bay Association, an organization of concerned property owners on Lake Huron and Michigan, argue that human meddling, including dredging and mining in the river, accelerated erosion. Erosion combined with the high velocity of the river's flow has accelerated outflow beyond natural rates, the association says.

The Les Cheneaux Islands Association supports the Georgian Bay Association's hypothesis, and two years ago joined the group in calling for governmental action. The Georgian Bay Association has suggested installing gates at the north end of the river, similar to the Soo Locks and dam system at Sault Ste. Marie, where the St. Marys River velocity is controlled.

IJC Upper Great Lakes Study researchers were charged with investigating not only the St. Clair River hypothesis, but also examining whether Lake Superior outflow at the Soo Locks should be changed to be more suited to current water levels.

Lake levels are a growing concern to the 33 million people who

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Mackinaw, Dock Will Display Michigan Historical Marker

By Paul Gingras

The historical importance of the decommissioned Coast Guard Cutter *Mackinaw* and the old state ferry docks in Mackinaw City and St. Ignace will be highlighted this spring with a Michigan Historical Marker. The \$3,100 sign was recently approved by the Michigan State Historic Preservation Office and will include text celebrating both the vessel and the docks.

Village resident Sandra Planisek applied for the sign and wrote the rough drafts of the messages it will display. She expects the two-sided, green and gold sign to be up by spring at the foot of the old railroad dock on South Huron Avenue

in Mackinaw City.

The 290-foot-long *Mackinaw*, built during World War II, is now a floating museum operated by Icebreaker Mackinac Maritime Museum (IMMM), of which Mrs. Planisek is a member. She is also a member of Mackinaw Area Historical Society and author of "Icebreaker Mackinaw: WAGB 83 1944-2006."

The sign will explain that modern ice-breaking developed right here on the Straits of Mackinac, Mrs. Planisek said.

Transferring people and materials between Michigan's two peninsulas via rail began in the 1880s

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Village resident Sandra Planisek poses at the old rail dock in Mackinaw City, in front of the decommissioned Coast Guard Cutter *Mackinaw* Thursday, December 13. The *Mackinaw* and the railroad dock were granted a state preservation office Tuesday, December 11, following an application made by Mrs. Planisek. The sign detailing their history is expected to be in place this spring, prior to daily tours, which will begin on the floating museum in June.