

# Continued Decline in Mackinac Bridge Traffic Causes Economic Concern

**Bridge:** From page 1

truck traffic is down 3.5% through October and passenger traffic is down 5.2%.

A 19.5% drop in commuter traffic is the result of cutting out bridge tokens and replacing them with debit cards, said Mr. Sweeney.

"Drivers can't divide up the commuter card like they divided up the tokens," he said. Tokens were sold until 2007 at reduced rates to commuters, but there was no way to keep them from being given to non-commuters. The MBA ended their use to eliminate abuses of the commuter discount.

A review of the bridge traffic separated into commercial, non-commercial, commuter, and recreational categories reveals almost all negative numbers, with only a handful of slight increases shown in any category during the first eight months of 2008. The year's increases make up a short list, as follows: Commercial truck traffic was up 1.2% in February, up 3.3% in April, and up 0.6% in July. In February, in the non-commercial category, passenger cars and pickups showed a 1% increase, in March a 2.3% increase, and in August a 2.4% increase.

## Does this year's toll hike impact the traffic decline?

It was one year ago, in November 2007, that toll increases were proposed for the bridge, from \$2.50 to \$3 for a passenger car and from \$1.50 to \$1.60 for commuters. They were put in place March 1. Does the toll hike have any impact on this year's declining traffic?

Mr. Sweeney is careful to neither confirm nor deny whether he thinks this year's higher prices have impacted the number of vehicle crossings, but he does point out that crossings have been affected by a national and state transportation crisis. People are driving less, he pointed out, some 65 billion fewer miles nationally in the past couple of years, as gas prices have soared and the economy has weakened.

The MBA also does not take a position on whether the price hikes have impacted traffic, Mr. Sweeney said, because it is more concerned that predictions are for continued traffic decreases, at least through 2010, even as preservation needs increase on the aging bridge.

"The Authority's main concern is with preserving the bridge and how the nationwide trends impact our 20-year plan," Mr. Sweeney said. "We are looking at how we can save money at the bridge, by cutting positions, reducing expenses, and energy savings. Also, I'm hopeful that eventually we may start to capture some outside funding, including Homeland Security grants, or money from the Federal Highway Administration," which the authority will apply for in February 2009, but he is less hopeful of this avenue now because "their revenues are down significantly because of the reduction in gas tax revenue."

With the 2008 price increase, revenues at the bridge are up 7.3% for the year, through September, and operation cuts will help save more money for the repairs.

Four jobs were cut at the bridge in 2008, and two workers retiring in 2009 will not be replaced. Five or six years ago, which Mr. Sweeney called peak staffing levels, the bridge employed 110 seasonal and full time workers, a number now down to 100. The maintenance department is growing because of increased demand for

## Big Rigs Crossing the Mackinac Bridge Traffic Down as Some Campers Stop Short of Paying Toll

By Ellen Paquin and John S. DeMott

Commercial trucks and motor homes – put together in the same classification this year by the Mackinac Bridge Authority – have similar impacts on the structure because of their 7,200-pound to 30,000-pound weight, Mr. Sweeney said.

"RVs are heavy vehicles," he said. "Anything above 7,200 pounds, the bridge is going to feel it going across."

The change in classification, and the way the recreational vehicles were checked through the booths by toll collectors, made it virtually impossible for the authority to accurately track the number of motor homes crossing the bridge this year. The change was made to correct an earlier error that drew some customer complaints – charging a motor home towing a car the same rate for the car as for the multiple-axle motor home. (Almost half of the motor homes that do cross are towing cars, Mr. Sweeney said.) Now that oversight has been corrected, but discrepancies in hitting the "recreational vehicle" tally button in the booth among toll collectors skewed this summer's record of that traffic category.

A look at campground occupancy rates on each side of the Straits suggests that some campers stopped short of crossing the Mackinac Bridge. Several private campground owners have speculated that high gas prices this summer and higher tolls on the bridge may have kept the big campers out of the U.P.

In Mackinaw City, Wilderness State Park reported only a slight drop in occupancy of 2%, and no discernible drop-off in motor home stays this summer, while on the St. Ignace side, Straits State Park reported a 14% decline in business.

"They just seemed to stop at the bridge," said

Wayne Burnett, who manages both campgrounds. "In July and August, every day Wilderness had 20 or 30 more campsites filled than Straits."

High gas prices and high bridge fares were among the most frequent complaints he heard from customers, he said. While the two parks on each side of the Straits of Mackinac had been "about equal" in occupancy in past years, this was the first year he noted the drop off.

In the commercial trucking sector, bridge traffic fell 3.5% for the year to date. Trucking companies were among those who voiced opposition to the toll increases at public hearings a year ago. There is little if anything they can do to avoid paying the higher prices. Now, almost a year later, while individual truckers are bearing higher costs that eat into their profits, said Tom Barnes of the Michigan Association of Timbemen, commercial truck companies are still crossing, as they are locked into their delivery commitments by contract.

The industry has appealed to the Mackinac Bridge Authority for a commuter-type discount, without success.

"They're penalizing the users who bring commerce across the bridge....," he told *The St. Ignace News*. "About all we can do is voice our displeasure."

Commercial truck tolls rose this year from \$3 per axle to \$3.50 and will be increased every two years to \$6 in 2014. The giant vehicles hauling Upper Peninsula logs and wood products, for one example, typically have 11 axles, paying \$38.50 per crossing.

Motor homes took the largest initial hit in this year's price increase, jumping from \$2 per axle to the \$3.50 truck rate March 1, and in the future will rise the same as trucks.

repairs, while the number of office workers and toll collectors is declining. Employee insurance costs have been reduced by increasing deductibles, travel and training expenses have been cut, and board members, who are unpaid appointees, no longer request reimbursement for travel to meetings, Mr. Sweeney pointed out.

## Declining Traffic Is a 10-year Trend

Traffic has been declining at the bridge for a decade.

Peak traffic years were 1998 and 1999, and numbers have fallen roughly 25% since then.

Passenger vehicle crossings have dropped even more, 38%, since 1998. Vehicles towing trailers are down 20%, and commercial trucks and buses are down 14.6% over the past decade.

In 2007, bridge traffic was 1.9% lower than in 2006.

This year, traffic counts show travel did decline in the state.

On I-75, traffic counts have fallen off somewhat this year, compared to last, although the 2008 numbers have not all been tabulated yet, said Matt Radulski of the Michigan Department of Transportation. He tracks traffic with a permanent traffic counter at Vanderbilt, north of Gaylord, and reported a drop of roughly 1,000 cars a day, taking into account both northbound and southbound traffic. In June 2007, 15,410 cars were

recorded there daily, with 14,853 recorded daily in June 2008, a drop of 3.6%. In July, the daily vehicle count at Vanderbilt was 20,801 last year, and 19,784 this year, about a 5% decrease.

## Next Decision Expected: Who Qualifies for a Discount?

Along with the March 1 toll increases, a seven-year plan was implemented a year ago that will jump tolls in one-year increments to 2014, during which time auto-

mobile tolls will be raised 50¢ every two years to \$4.50 in 2014 and commuter tolls will climb 10¢ every year to \$2.20.

In August of this year, the authority doubled the amount that drivers must deposit on a commuter card, to \$80.

The next decision to be made by the Bridge Authority, one that's been a year in the making and is expected next month, is to define who qualifies for the commuter discount.



**Open House**

November 30th • 11 a.m. - 4 p.m.

**Great Food, Drawings and Glass Demos**

Holiday Hours:  
**December 19th - 23rd**  
10 a.m. - 5 p.m.

*We Will Also Be Open Weekends*  
Saturday & Sunday 10 a.m. - 5 p.m.  
[www.creekside-herbs.com](http://www.creekside-herbs.com)



## Task Force Report Says Michigan Must Double Its Investment in Transportation

Michigan is in a transportation funding crisis, and drivers and other users are going to have to pay more to push it out, a new report says.

Last week, a special task force recommended several possible solutions to help Michigan find its way out of the crisis. The state has to double its investment in the transportation system to avoid losing about \$1 billion in federal funding each year, and to maintain state roads, bridges, rail, and aviation systems.

The report, released November 10, finds Michigan is not in a position to take advantage of new federal funding because this is the last year that Michigan will be able to come up with enough state and local matching money.

The good news is the funding gap can be closed, the report says, by drawing in federal and local government resources as well as the private sector to boost transportation investments.

Raising user fees is recommended to accomplish these goals. The typical driver in the state pays 2.5¢ in road user fees for each mile driven, and a typical semi-truck contributes 8.33¢. Transit investment in the state is only one-half to one-tenth of the investment made by other populated, economically diverse states, the task force points out.

Members of the task force considered more than 100 ways to raise revenue for all modes of transportation in Michigan, including roads, public transit, and aviation, to stave off the looming funding shortfall.

Among proposals made by the task force are raising vehicle registration fees, eliminating registration discounts, raising the motor fuel tax of 19¢ per gallon, making taxes equal on diesel and gasoline, increasing the sales tax and dedicating the increase to transportation funding, directing all or part of the sales tax on fuels to transportation funding, and directing all or some of the Natural Resources Trust Fund revenue to roads.

These recommendations will now go to the state legislature and the governor for consideration.

Results of investing in the system include sustaining 126,000 Michigan jobs, attracting new business, and yielding nearly \$15 billion in other economic benefits for all segments of the state economy. Citing an economic analysis by the University of Michigan, the report says for an average Michigan household, such investments would equate to an additional \$2,000 per year in increased personal income and savings through reduced travel time, reduced vehicle maintenance, and increased safety.

The Transportation Funding Task Force was created in response to legislation that passed Michigan's Senate and House of Representatives with a bipartisan majority and was signed by the governor in December of last year.

The task force is made up of 13 members, nine representing manufacturing, labor, transportation, agriculture, aviation, commerce, public transit, tourism, and the general public, and four members of the legislature representing each legislative body and each party.

## H.O.M.E. For the Holidays Event

# Live Auction

Five Table Top Theme Decorated Trees, Wreaths, Gift Baskets, Fitness Passes, Carriage Tours, Ferry Passes, Pictures & Many More Great Gift Ideas for Christmas!

Friday, Nov. 21 7:00 p.m.

Little Bear East Arena  
275 Marquette Street, St. Ignace

Tickets: \$10.00 each includes your auction number, beverage & Hors d'oeuvres

Join us for an evening of fun for a great cause!

Auctioneer is Charlie Fowler

To reserve your ticket or to donate to the auction call Lori at 906-643-6239  
Proceeds Benefit H.O.M.E. of Mackinac County Affordable Housing Projects

"Before my surgery 18 months ago, I used a scooter to go any farther than a block. Nine months later I completed my first 'marathon' - a five kilometer, non-competitive walk. Life is good!"  
- Sue Wilkins, Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario



"The whole thing can be overwhelming, but when my husband and I went to the seminar, it was like a big weight was lifted off our shoulders. We knew we were in the right place. I really was very much at ease."  
- Angie Glazier, Traverse City (pictured above)

## Weight Loss Seminar

Learn About Surgical Options

Thursday, December 4, 6 - 8 pm

Kewadin Casinos Hotel and Convention Center  
Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan

Join us at Kewadin Casino to learn more, or to ask questions about:

- Surgical options, including gastric bypass
- Minimally-invasive LAP-BAND® procedure
- Insurance coverage
- Qualifications for surgical weight loss program

Space is limited; registration is required by December 1.

Surgical procedures for weight loss are not for everyone, but have dramatically improved the lives of some people.

To learn more or to register, call Angie at Grand Traverse Surgery at (231) 935-8900 or visit [munsonhealthcare.org](http://munsonhealthcare.org).

Presented by Grand Traverse Surgery and Munson Medical Center, an OHIP Approved Provider for Bariatric Surgery.



MUNSON MEDICAL CENTER

MUNSON HEALTHCARE

[munsonhealthcare.org](http://munsonhealthcare.org)



## WINTER TIRES?

**Firestone**

For All Your Tire Needs

be tire smart



1129 E. Easterday Ave.,  
Sault Ste. Marie, MI 49783  
(906) 632-6661 • 1-800-635-6661  
[www.uptire.com](http://www.uptire.com)