



Thursday, July 3, 2008

Flint Lawmaker In Middle Of Crossing Battle

Rep. Lee Gonzales (D-Flint), the head of the House Appropriations Transportation Subcommittee has been knee deep in transportation issues this session — not the least of which is an ongoing battle over an additional bridge from Detroit to Canada and where that bridge will be placed.

GCSIntel talked to Gonzales in depth about that issue. The following are excerpts from that conversation.

Q. Why does the state need to find an additional site for a bridge between Detroit and Windsor?

A. It's a complicated topic. The DRIC (Detroit River International Crossing) study has been looking at how we can put together additional capacity at the Detroit River. We also have what would be called a backup plan, a "just in case" system, if there's ever a huge accident on one of the ends. The Ambassador Bridge runs a great operation for what it is. In fact, it's reaching an 80th anniversary next year, but based on traffic projections we need an additional crossing.

The contention is that the Ambassador Bridge believes there isn't a need for a separate plan. They believe their twinning concept of their present construction is sufficient. The DRIC study has shown a need for a separate span. This is a bi-national project. The Canadian side is going through a major impact study and they're saying that there's no way to twin on that side. The Ambassador Bridge says there is enough room. DRIC is looking at it from a public policy standpoint because that's what's best for the people in the state of Michigan and internationally.

There was a memo signed between our federal government and theirs (Canadians) last November. The agreement recognizes a need for additional capacity and an additional need for redundancy, which is the back up bridge.

We could reflect back to the Twin Towers where they could take out two towers side by side. If there was a calamity or terrible accident where the Ambassador Bridge could not function — such as a storm or something else — we would need a back up span. We really need another six lanes to accommodate the future commercial growth over the next 20 years.

Q. Those opposed to the measure claim the numbers in the DRIC study are inflated and the need for a new bridge exaggerated. Is it reasonable to argue that the state doesn't need multiple bridges at that location?

A. We are using a proven methodology and they (opponents) have not shown any of their own forecasts. The Ambassador Bridge has used the DRIC information in documents submitted to different levels of government. Our data is clear that there will be growth. It's just like the stock market. It may go up and down, but there is always a steady traffic problem. We have all the documentation and, if they have their own methodology, they show it as being fixed for the next 40 years and that's impossible.

Q. Where are we in terms of reaching an agreement?

A. I'm very earnest in working with Sen. Bill Hardiman (R-Kentwood). He's my point person in the Senate in terms of government appropriations. I'm working with him and look forward to working with Sen. Alan Cropsey (R-Dewitt) as well as the governor, who is supporting us. We're going to have to continue talking about reaching a solution to benefit the residents in Michigan.

Keep in mind that this is a bi-national negotiation. It's about America's interests, it's about Michigan's interests, it's about the Providence of Ontario's interests and it's about Canadian interests.

Q. Will we have an agreement by the end of the year?

A. We have to have an agreement. I'm hopeful we'll do it within the next month, hopefully. We have to make sure to look at it very objectively. We're looking at it with all these business interests. They say they support the DRIC study.

An infrastructure decision of this magnitude needs to have this debate.

Q. In the past, Michigan has been touted as having one of the greatest supply chains in the country. What steps does the state need to take to recapture this reputation?

A. We've had a history of being a leader in transportation and I think this coincides with what we're looking at. They've had hundreds of public hearings. That's what it's all about. It's getting all the stakeholders together to think about ways to have the infrastructure that no one else in the world has.

It takes the best ideas of everyone involved. SEMCOG (Southeast Council of Michigan Governments) has made a favorable statement on the DRIC study. Any area worth its salt has to look at it regionally because that's how we do the best planning for the economy. Michigan is attracting a lot of innovation firms, Google is an example, and all of these things tie together. That's why we have to make all of our infrastructure [top notch] to attract these innovative firms.

We're working in Flint to turn sewage into biofuel and in order to do this, the infrastructure has to be top notch. Later this year we'll celebrate GM's 100th anniversary. Flint is where GM started and that's where we need to put our frame of mind. We have to look at how we make Michigan the most attractive state in the global economy.

GCSEye On The Capitol

Feds: MI Has Highest Jobless Rate

At 8.5 percent unemployment, Michigan had the highest over-the-year unemployment rate jump in the country according to the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Last May the state had a jobless rate of 6.7 percent. Since May of '07 the state has lost some 68,900 jobs, the most in that period of time for any state. Coming in second was Rhode Island which lost 11,300 jobs. That state has an unemployment rate of 7.2 percent.

Michigan also posted the number one month-to-month jobless jump between April and May of this year when jobless rates climbed to 8.5 percent in May, a one-month 1.6 percentage point increase.

Wee Hours See Budget Almost Done

In advance of a roughly two-week legislative July 4 break, lawmakers in the wee hours of Saturday morning finished up the bulk of the 2008-2009 budget.

Remaining to be dealt with upon their return is the Department of Transportation budget, which was stalled over the Detroit River International Crossing issue (see Centerpiece above), the K-12 budget, General Government and Strategic Fund.

In a session day that lasted some 17 hours, a number of items were finished off including:

- The Blue Cross/Blue Shield healthcare bills were forwarded to a conference committee. While not completed, this marks the next major step in the push for individual healthcare market reforms.
- The Senate passed its version of energy reform legislation, pushing down the renewable portfolio standard (that portion of the state's energy that must come from renewable sources) from the House backed 10 percent to 7 percent - a level Democrats decried as too little.

The Week Ahead

Reform MI Now To Turn In Signatures

On Monday, the constitutional amendment effort dubbed "Reform Michigan Government Now" is expected to turn in at least 380,000 signatures in the group's effort to obtain a spot on the November ballot.

The brainchild of Michigan Democratic Party Chair Mark Brewer, the effort is being dubbed by the Republican Party Chair and others as a move by Democrats to enshrine in the Michigan constitution objectives and policy changes that they could not accomplish through legislative or judicial action.

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