

Protect the Mackinac Bridge From Enbridge Oil Tunnel

OPINION

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By Barbara J. Brown

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Plans calling for the Mackinac Bridge Authority to own the proposed Enbridge crude oil tunnel beneath the Straits of Mackinac are ill advised and not in the best interests of the Mackinac Bridge.

For over 60 years the bridge has served as a symbol of our great state – the very manifestation of the courage, cooperation, innovation, and determination of those who risked their political and professional reputations to make the bridge a reality, and, also, those who risked their lives to build it. Businesses from the tip of the Keweenaw Peninsula to the Ohio state line and across the four directions of our state proudly incorporate images of the bridge in their logos. Jewelry and T-shirts displaying images of its soaring towers and elegant catenary are ubiquitous.

Built in the 1950s as part of our state highway system, and housed within the Department of Transportation for administrative purposes, the Mackinac Bridge Authority has operated for over 60 years as an independent authority free from outside influence and political pressure. And over the decades when that independence has been threatened, every one of our former Governors has stepped up to the plate to protect that independence.

Why? Because the Mackinac Bridge is unique and so is the authority created to maintain and govern it. To protect its revenue stream and other assets necessary to construct and now maintain and operate the bridge, the Mackinac Bridge Authority has an impressive list of powers: the power to charge a fare for crossing, the power to issue bonds to raise

funds, statutory protection of its financial assets from raiding by other agencies or the legislature, and the power to condemn private property for its public purpose.

And while previous administrations have fought to protect this powerful, single-purpose governmental authority from power grabs, the current administration, through agreements with Enbridge, is handing this private, foreign corporation access to our powers and authority through a “shotgun wedding” between the Mackinac Bridge Authority and Enbridge. As of November 1, the Governor will have four new appointees on the bridge authority and majority control to do his bidding. The governor has made clear he hopes to complete this forced marriage by the end of the year.

Whether the proposed tunnel is a prudent and viable alternative to the highly controversial Line 5 pipelines running across the Straits is a separate issue from whether such a tunnel should ever become the property of the Mackinac Bridge Authority. I strongly submit to readers that it should not. Even if the many experts who must be consulted on the efficacy and safety of such a tunnel determine it to be a safe alternative to Line 5, it would take up to 10 years to build and burden the bridge authority with continuous oversight and responsibility to build a tunnel for a private corporation. It should never be the business of the Mackinac Bridge Authority to own and, thus, be responsible and liable for an energy tunnel that serves shareholder-owned energy companies. It is not why the bridge authority was created, and it is not what we do.

It is interesting to note that the very news release announcing the agreement with Enbridge lists three state agencies, the Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Environmental Quality, and the Michigan Agency for Energy, as well as the Governor’s office, as points of contact to answer questions about the agreements. Neither the Department of Transportation nor the Mackinac Bridge Authority is listed. Why are these three state agencies whose job it is to oversee our energy needs and to regulate and protect us from environmental disasters passing the buck to the Mackinac Bridge Authority? The proposed tunnel has nothing to do with the state highway system and, thus, is not and should not be the responsibility of a governmental body whose mission is solely focused on transportation.

Moreover, there are too many outstanding and unanswered questions about the viability and safety of the proposed oil tunnel, as well as its fiscal impact on the finances of the Mackinac Bridge Authority. The agreement anticipates that the bridge authority will provide Enbridge the land necessary to construct the tunnel. Will this require the bridge authority to condemn its neighbors’ property on both sides of the Straits? Who will pay for the appraisals, the legal costs associated with condemnation, and the

ultimate price for the property? Who will be liable for accidents and unforeseen problems that are sure to arise down the road?

The Mackinac Bridge Authority has prudently and judiciously established fares and saved its money to undertake the \$200,000,000 redecking project slated to begin in the next few years. What are the fiscal implications for the bridge authority and, also, what will happen to bridge fares when our assets are diverted to the tunnel project? Will we need to issue bonds and incur debt to meet our new obligations? Will we need to hire more employees? Who will pay for them? Who will pay for the land? Who will be responsible for the myriad problems which are sure to arise? And these are just the fiscal implications.

Who will pay for the necessary independent geo-technical studies, the legal analysis of the public/private partnership, the environmental and fiscal impact studies? Who? Very likely the drivers of passenger cars and freight haulers at the toll booths!

The Mackinac Bridge Authority has done its job well. The tunnel is not and should not be its responsibility. The Mackinac Bridge must once again be protected from outside influences and undue political pressure, and remain the independent authority that has served travelers and the State of Michigan so well.

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