



EBTC INFORMATION BULLETIN

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More than a mile of teal-painted steel rises over the Detroit River, just another bridge really but for the thousands of trucks and hundreds of thousands of dollars in goods that rumble across it each day between the United States and Canada.

In fact, this ordinary four-lane bridge is the busiest commercial border crossing in North America, carrying one-third of all road trade — or more than \$122 billion in goods a year — between the two countries.

But the span, the Ambassador Bridge, is owned by neither country, nor by the cities of Detroit or Windsor, Detroit's Canadian neighbor, nor by some public bridge authority. It is owned by one man and his privately held company.

In a remarkable arrangement for a crossing so major, Manuel J. Moroun, a reclusive billionaire from Detroit's suburbs who oversees a trucking empire, owns the bridge, one of only two privately owned bridges along the entire northern border of the United States and by far the most economically significant privately owned bridge in the nation.

Now, with so much commerce depending on a single structure, people have begun to wonder what would happen if a terrorist were to attack it or if the Ambassador Bridge, approaching 80 years old, were to fail.

And so a race is on to build a new \$1 billion crossing here.

In a confluence of concerns over national border security, the safety of the nation's stock of bridges and an economic crisis in Michigan, the unusual arrangement here has prompted a simple question: Who should own a bridge?

Opened in 1929, the Ambassador Bridge was privately built by Joseph Bower, a New York financier. Even during its construction, a fight — led mainly by the mayor of Detroit — raged over whether the bridge should be run by a private company or a public agency.

At the time, plenty of bridges were privately owned, though soon the trends moved away from that. Eventually, Mr. Moroun began acquiring stock in the bridge's owner, the Detroit International Bridge Company, and gained control of the company nearly three decades ago.

Of the 24 vehicular bridges and tunnels between Canada and the United States, only the Ambassador and the bridge connecting International Falls, Minn., and Fort Francis, Ontario, are private.

Supporters of a publicly owned span here say it is the only wise plan, the only one that offers needed public oversight and regulation. They have deep concerns, they say, about allowing a single man to continue his decades-long reign over such a vital connector of nations.

“This man is making billions of dollars on that bridge,” said Raymond E. Basham, a Michigan state senator and a Democrat, who said that only a public bridge could ensure the structural inspections and domestic security needed. “When it comes to dollars and cents, there is every incentive for him not to tell us if something is wrong. We have an obligation for the safety of people.”

But Mr. Moroun, who is known to most people here by his nickname, Matty, wants to build another bridge himself. Officials from his company say they would open a six-lane span to replace the Ambassador Bridge, which would also be fixed up and could be reopened if the new span ever ran into trouble. Already, the company has bought and boarded up dozens of houses to make way for the Ambassador’s privately owned twin.

In a way, Mr. Moroun’s offer seems tempting, particularly on this side of the border. The region’s automobile-centric manufacturing economy is in free fall, and lawmakers in Lansing, the capital, barely averted a shutdown of government services on Oct. 1, after a standoff over how to make up for the state’s expected \$1.75 billion budget shortfall.

“It’s just lunacy for the taxpayers of Michigan and Canada to pick up the bill for this bridge,” said Alan Cropsey, a Republican state senator who supports the private bridge. “Why do they feel they need to put a bridge up and compete with the private sector? Why now?”

Each plan — the public and the private — would cost about \$1 billion. Each plan still requires many approvals from government agencies on both sides of the border. And each would ultimately be paid for, advocates for the public bridge say, by tolls from bridge users.

Some residents in Detroit and Windsor, particularly those who live near the foot of the Ambassador Bridge, dispute the need for any new crossing. In 2000, more than 12 million cars, trucks and buses crossed the bridge, Michigan transportation officials said. In 2006, vehicles numbered fewer than 10 million, though the number of trucks was nearly the same as before.

“Who needs another?” said Victor Abla, whose window in the Southwest Detroit neighborhood of Hubbard Farms looks out on the Ambassador Bridge. “With trucks backed up on the bridge that’s already here, the pollution is horrible in my neighborhood, and the asthma rates are sky high.”

But some studies of traffic on the bridge suggest that it will reach its capacity as early as 2015, said Mark Butler, a spokesman for Transport Canada, a government agency. Others say it will take longer. For now, one question remains: Which bridge will be built?

Advocates for a public bridge complain that Mr. Moroun’s plans will receive special attention from leaders here because of his long history of political campaign contributions. Indeed, campaign contribution records reveal years of donations by him and his family to a wide array of politicians and committees from both parties.

In a request made through Dan Stamper, the president of the Detroit International Bridge Company, Mr. Moroun declined to be interviewed within the time frame of this article. Mr. Moroun might consider an interview “in a month or so,” Mr. Stamper said.

For his part, Mr. Stamper defended plans for a new private bridge. He dismissed the matter of Mr. Moroun’s political allegiances and said security concerns were needless: the bridge company had hired private security guards to watch the bridge in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11.

Mr. Stamper also said that the Ambassador Bridge received structural inspections every year from private firms and that the results of those inspections were made available to Michigan and Canadian transportation authorities, though not to the public. Michigan transportation officials said they were for the first time allowed to see a full inspection report in 2005 as part of a road expansion agreement.

Mr. Stamper disputed that, saying the bridge company had earlier shared inspection reports with the state, as well as with Canadian officials.

“To the people who say that they’re uncomfortable with this being private, I say, ‘We are a success story,’” Mr. Stamper said.

Leaders in the auto industry here, which depends on the bridge for carrying parts between assembly plants on both sides, have supported studying a government bridge.

Frederick W. Hoffman, the director of state relations for Chrysler, said, “Our particular concern is that there be multiple owners, and thus more competition in the costs.”

The current bridge charges \$3.75 for cars; trucks (about 12,000 of which cross here each day during the busiest part of the week) pay by weight, averaging, Mr. Stamper said, \$12.

In the end, no one is ruling out the possibility that both bridges may be built.