



INFORMATION BULLETIN

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SUBJECT: *Canada's new consul general is determined to build a new Detroit River Bridge*

SOURCE: *Jack Lessenberry, Michigan Radio, 8/21/14*

I had a conversation yesterday with Douglas George, the Canadian government's new consul general in Detroit.

For Canada, this area is an economic region important enough to merit a mini-embassy. Ottawa has a vast suite of offices in the Renaissance Center, and a large staff, some busy with immigration matters, and the rest primarily with economic and trade questions.

One indication of how important Canada sees Detroit is that Consul George was most recently their ambassador to Kuwait, and before that was a major trade negotiator who at various times headed both their government's tariff and intellectual property divisions.

Here, he is responsible for trade and other issues involving a five-state area economically vital to Canada.

Detroit is, without any doubt, the most important border crossing between our two nations, and businesses on both sides of the border, especially Canada, have been consumed by the need for a second bridge capable of handling major freight.

Every week, well over a billion dollars in heavy automotive and other manufacturing components pass over the 85-year-old Ambassador Bridge. There is no other economically and geographically feasible way of moving this stuff.

Nor is the current bridge in a sensible location, especially for Canada. Trucks coming from Detroit have to endure 16 red lights before connecting with a major highway.

For years, any new crossing was stymied by Matty Moroun, the billionaire who owns the Ambassador Bridge.

But now both governments have agreed to build one, now known as the New International Trade Crossing. They aren't quite home free yet. Washington has yet to agree to fund the customs plaza needed for what will be a major outpost between two nations.

And the consul told me Michigan has not yet finished buying and assembling all the parcels of land needed for the bridge's footprint on the American side. Canada needs this bridge so much that it has agreed to foot all the upfront costs.

Michigan, in turn, will pay them back years from now out of the state's share of the tolls. But legally, our state has to buy the land, which is in Delray, a rundown neighborhood a couple of miles south of the current bridge.

However, there are hangups. Much of the land is owned by Detroit, and some council members are insisting on a defined package of community benefits.

He hopes that before long, a new generation of Canadian kids will be streaming in to the revitalized city, some of them over a new bridge.

Clearly, bridges aren't built in a day. Douglas George is philosophical about this, and says he thinks the new bridge could still be open for business by the target date of 2020.

His father was an attorney in Sarnia, right across the river from Port Huron, and spent something like a quarter-century on a commission striving to get a new bridge built there. If you are a diplomat, it helps to take the long view.

For George, this post is almost a homecoming. Growing up, he came to Detroit every chance he got to see concerts.

The city's decline saddened him, but he told me yesterday he was happily amazed by how fast things seemed to be turning around.

He hopes that before long, a new generation of Canadian kids will be streaming in to the revitalized city, some of them over a new bridge.

Jack Lessenberry is Michigan Radio's political analyst. Views expressed in the essays by Lessenberry are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of Michigan Radio, its management or the station licensee, The University of Michigan.