

RIVAL BRIDGE PLAN MOVES AHEAD

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FORT ERIE – A Michigan company is moving ahead with plans to build a new bridge linking Fort Erie and Buffalo.

The Ambassador Niagara Signature Bridge Group has applied to the U.S. State Department for a permit to construct and operate a bridge about 2½ kilometres north of the Peace Bridge, the third-busiest commercial crossing and second-busiest overall crossing in North America.

The State Department will accept written comments on the application until April 28.

Ambassador's regional director, James Kane, said the private-sector proposal consists of a \$300-million four-lane bridge near the existing International Railroad Bridge.

Based on renderings of their plans included in their application, trucks would have access to the bridge from the Canadian side via a roadway that would run parallel to the train tracks that lead to the International Railway Bridge.

Ambassador's bridge would service the approximately 6,000 trucks that now cross the Peace Bridge daily, and relegate the existing Peace Bridge to passenger vehicles only.

The plans have been in the works for seven years and include private investment, land acquisition, engineering and environmental impact studies, said Kane.

"We are providing a sound and feasible alternative to taking about 90 homes and 30 businesses from the historic side of Buffalo," said Kane, referring to the Buffalo and Fort Erie Public Bridge Authority's plans for its own new bridge.

The Peace Bridge Authority opposes the Ambassador group's proposal.

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Proposed bridge targeting truck traffic

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The Peace Bridge is in the midst of expansion plans of its own to ease frequent commercial backups. Those plans would uproot the surrounding Buffalo neighbourhood for a larger U.S. plaza in the process.

"Our proposal would take the trucks off the Peace Bridge, create a true tourist gateway and would put the trucks down where industry, railroad and transportation has been developed for more than the past 100-plus years."

Kane said Ambassador's plans would "compliment" the Peace Bridge.

"We view this as a bridge system – two bridges between Buffalo and Fort Erie – one for cars, which would be the existing Peace Bridge, while ours would take the truck traffic off that bridge," he said, adding the new bridge would also handle car traffic.

"You look to Niagara Falls, the Rainbow Bridge is more of a tourist crossing while Queenston-Lewiston is a commercial crossing. That's sort of what we're offering."

Ron Rienas, general manager for the Peace Bridge Authority, said studies have determined the site for the new bridge proposed by Ambassador is unworkable because of cost and environmental concerns.

"That corridor has been studied extensively through our (environmental impact study) process. We studied it and if it was reasonable and made sense, we would have constructed there. But that is simply not the case," said Rienas.

"But the Ambassador group has been here for years and it's great to see that they finally filed for a permit. Finally, an application of theirs can be commented on and scrutinized."

It has been easy for them to criticize the PBA's plans for a companion span because we have been open and trans-



This is an architect's rendering of the proposed new crossing between Fort Erie and Buffalo by the Ambassador Niagara Signature Bridge Group. The view is from Black Rock in Buffalo looking towards Fort Erie. Submitted graphic

parent – our studies and documents have been open to review and comment by government officials and members of the public. Now it's their turn."

Rienas said Canadian law prohibits anyone from building any bridge within 9.6 kilometres of the Peace Bridge without the bridge authority's permission.

Kane disagreed. "The Public Bridge Authority does not have veto power, it's up to the governments in Canada and the United States. They have the final say on who can build a new bridge and when and where, not the PBA."

The Ambassador Niagara Signature Bridge Group is a unit of the Detroit International Bridge Co., which along

with the Canadian Transit Co. owns and operates the busiest vehicle crossing along the border, the Ambassador Bridge between Detroit and Windsor.

The group's application for a presidential permit is an early step in a project that will also require approval from Canada.

Kane said the group will meet with state and federal officials over the next three months to outline plans and try to secure support.

The State Department will decide after a period of public input whether to allow the project to go forward.

Meanwhile, Rienas said the bridge authority is close to finalizing its final environmental impact study, as part of its plans to build a new U.S. plaza and a companion-span to the Peace Bridge.

The authority's draft study was published in the fall of 2007 and went through about three months of public review and comment.

"Those comments are being addressed in the final (environmental impact study) to reduce the impact our plan has on the communities and on the environment."

Rienas said once the final study is completed in about a month, it will be circulated to various government agencies.

"We hope to get a record of decision in late spring."

Rienas also questioned Kane's com-

ment that an Ambassador group crossing would complement the Peace Bridge.

"Their plan from the beginning was to take over the operations of the Peace Bridge ... and although only 20 per cent of our traffic is trucks, that makes up 70 per cent of our toll revenue. If we didn't have trucks, we would have to increase our car tolls, which is never a popular decision."

Kane said the Ambassador group has no intention of operating or owning the Peace Bridge.

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