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Peace Bridge study shouldn't delay highway

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The Hamilton Spectator

The Niagara region has been condemned to at least four more years of traffic gridlock before construction can start on an expanded Peace Bridge. But Hamilton-Wentworth Chairman Terry Cooke says he doesn't see that as stalling progress on the proposed mid-peninsula highway between Fort Erie and John C. Munro Hamilton International Airport.

"Our best case scenario (for the mid-peninsula highway) is five to seven years for shovels in the ground. This shouldn't mean any delay," said Cooke.

The province is to complete a study of the highway that is proposed to run along the Niagara escarpment linking Fort Erie to Highway 403 and the Hamilton airport.

Cooke says the highway, an alternative to another expansion on the congested Queen Elizabeth Way, can't proceed without expanded bridge capacity in Niagara.

The Peace Bridge Authority announced yesterday it has started a binational integrated environmental process that will satisfy both Canadian and American federal, state and local environmental regulations in a review of the plans for expanding capacity on the 73-year-old bridge.

The environmental review will receive input from the public, elected officials, agencies and interested groups from both Canada and the United States.

The study is being undertaken to appease opponents of a plan to twin the three-lane bridge, expand the American customs plaza and redeck the original structure. It also means the authority won't appeal a New York court decision earlier this year that struck down the twinning plan on the basis of insufficient environmental studies.

Politicians on the American side have been pushing for a new showpiece six-lane bridge and customs plaza. Construction could cost \$309 million.

"The long-term expansion of this bridge is still up in the air and it is very frustrating " said Fort Erie Mayor Wayne Redekon "I have been involved with

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...making, said John DeMayor, mayor of Niagara Falls. "I have been involved with this issue for more than three years. This will bog it down even more. I only hope the authorities who have control over this process ensure it moves forward and eliminate any roadblocks."

His community has been promoting existing tourist destinations and pursuing others as well as trying to expand manufacturing in the border town.

"Anything that hampers the movement of goods and people between the two countries across that bridge will have a negative impact," said Redekop.

Cooke is confident the federal and provincial governments are committed to improving the flow of traffic, especially in Niagara.

"We're getting an increased sense of urgency, particularly in Niagara. Reading between the lines, to me that suggests folks will give this a fast-tracked approach."

Both he and Redekop fear continued political intervention from the American side.

"In the absence of political intervention I'm sure it can proceed quickly," said Cooke. "I don't minimize the fact the American political situation is more of a quagmire than ours."

Hamilton-Wentworth is bogged down in the federal environmental process with its plan to build the Red Hill Creek Expressway. Redekop says it has been politics on the American side that has so far blocked plans for expanding the bridge that spans the Niagara River. Both Redekop and Cooke are hopeful interim measures will be taken to improve the flow of traffic across the bridge during the study period.

Canada has already appointed more customs officers to help, Redekop said. But "the American government has been on vacation on this thing. They are not willing to change the process."

The Peace Bridge is the second-busiest border crossing in North America. It handles about 6,000 trucks a day and several thousand vehicles travelling on business or pleasure.

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