

Overdue Evaluation Slows St. Croix River Crossing Efforts

Area Taxpayers and Businesses Await Document From National Park Service

The decades-old issue of a new crossing over the St. Croix River to replace the historic Lift Bridge in Stillwater, Minnesota remains at a standstill.

In late September 2010, St. Croix Valley leaders called on the National Park Service and elected officials in Washington, D.C. for action. Among those seeking action is the St. Croix Bridge Alliance, a 2-state organization formed in 1997 to advocate for the funding and construction of a new river crossing. The Alliance is chaired by John D. Soderberg, a business and opinion leader from New Richmond (St. Croix County), Wisconsin.

“Last March, Judge Michael Davis ruled that the National Park Service failed to clearly explain its support for the latest river crossing proposal compared to the Park Service’s 1996 position that a crossing would have a detrimental impact on the qualities of the St. Croix River,” said Soderberg. “Judge Davis sent the Park Service back to the drawing board and asked the agency to document how their position had changed since 1996. We were told by the Park Service that its new evaluation, called a Section 7a environmental review, would be ready for vetting around July 1st. There’s still no definitive response from the Park Service.”

The Park Service and Department of Interior focused much of their attention this past spring and summer on the oil spill in the Gulf Coast. Soderberg and others remain skeptical that the

same Park Service administrators would be involved in the oil spill and a more thorough evaluation that Judge Davis ordered.

“Time is the enemy for infrastructure projects,” stated Soderberg. “With each passing week and month, the cost of this vital project for the Twin Cities increases. Congress continues to spend money on roads and bridges elsewhere. We’d like to see unemployed steelworkers called back

for assignments on the St. Croix River Crossing.”

In a September 30th letter, the Bridge Alliance asked the Director of the Park Service in Washington, D.C. for an update on the status of the Section 7a review.

Soderberg was part of the facilitated 28-person Environmental Streamlining stakeholder process from 2003-2006. The Environmental Streamlining process brought top-level federal, state and local officials together to complete the environmental and regulatory reviews needed on the St. Croix River project. In October 2006 the stakeholders announced a preferred location and design for

“Time is the enemy for infrastructure projects,” stated Soderberg. “With each passing week and month, the cost of this vital project for the Twin Cities increases. Congress continues to spend money on roads and bridges elsewhere. We’d like to see unemployed steelworkers called back for assignments on the St. Croix River Crossing.”



John D. Soderberg
Chair, St. Croix
Bridge Alliance

a new river crossing. This was followed by a Record of Decision from the Federal Highway Administration in November 2006.

The stakeholder process was designed to avoid litigation, but in June 2007, the Sierra Club filed a lawsuit to stop the project. “The Sierra Club was among the stakeholders during the review,” said Soderberg. “Their lawsuit speaks to the integrity of the process – they participated in the project in good faith and then sued.

The remaining issue for Judge Davis is the expanded evaluation from the Park Service. Until it is completed, state and federal agencies are reluctant to conduct tests like load-testing for bridge piers until the expanded Section 7a is accepted by Judge Davis.



The Lift Bridge connecting St. Joseph, Wisconsin in St. Croix County with Stillwater, Minnesota was built in 1931. Traffic congestion, safety problems, and delays caused by the operation of the lift mechanism have spurred the discussion of a new river crossing. The estimated (congestion free) vehicle capacity of the Lift Bridge is 11,200 vehicles a day. A 2002 traffic study estimated 16,300 vehicles a day cross the bridge and this volume can exceed 19,000 on a summer weekend.



This photo simulation (from the Minnesota shore) illustrates the proposed St. Croix River Crossing between Oak Park Heights, Minnesota and St. Joseph (St. Croix County) Wisconsin.