

Passage of SB 26 Advances River Crossing Project

The Wisconsin Assembly passed SB 26 on June 8, bringing the St. Croix River Crossing project another step closer to reality. Seventy-one members of the Assembly voted "yes" on SB 26, while 26 voted "no" and one member did not cast a vote. SB 26 passed in the Senate last month, and will move to Governor Scott Walker's office for his signature.

SB 26 repeals an onerous requirement that Wisconsin first obtain \$75 million in federal funds prior to initiating state bonding authority (borrowing) for major interstate bridge projects like the St. Croix River Crossing. The 2009 law was viewed as a major obstacle for infrastructure that required both state and federal funding. The federal earmark requirement meant the St. Croix River project needed to be included in a national transportation bill or special appropriations legislation. Congress has moved away from one-time earmarks for major projects. A more traditional funding approach is to ensure state borrowing capacity exists before federal dollars are awarded.

"This is great news for the St. Croix Valley," said William Rubin, executive director of St. Croix Economic Development Corporation. "The need for a new river crossing was documented decades ago. The bridge helps the greater Twin Cities metro area address a project of regional significance for both Wisconsin and Minnesota."

The Bill was sponsored by State Senator Sheila Harsdorf and co-sponsored by Representatives John Murtha, Dean Knudson, and Erik Severson, all of whom represent St. Croix County. On previous occasions they have stated the importance of a new bridge over the St. Croix River between Houlton (Town of St. Joseph), Wisconsin and Oak Park Heights, Minnesota.



Photo simulation of the proposed river crossing looking west at the King Plant.
Photo simulation from the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

A new bridge has been debated since the 1970s. It is designed to replace an 80-year old lift bridge that is at the end of its economic life. The St. Croix River is designated as a Wild and Scenic River and is protected to ensure its natural qualities are preserved. The wild/scenic designation places limitations on allowing water road, bridge and dam projects.

Last October the National Park Service concluded that the proposed bridge would have direct and adverse effects on the St. Croix River. An exemption to the Wild and Scenic Rivers legislation is being pursued in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, where Bills have been introduced. There is bipartisan support for the exemption, including Representatives Michele Bachmann (MN) and Ron Kind, along with U.S. Senators Amy Klobuchar (MN), Herb Kohl (WI), Al Franken (MN), and Ron Johnson (WI), plus Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker, Minnesota Governor Mark Dayton, and their respective departments of transportation.

"It now falls on our federal elected officials to obtain the necessary federal approval," said State Senator Sheila Harsdorf in a June 9 release. "Time is of the essence. Until this bridge is replaced, public safety will continue to be at risk."