

## **Border Crossing Study at Blue Water Bridge Leads to Improved Community Relations and Creative Transportation Solutions**

Source: Michigan DOT

The Blue Water Bridge is the fourth-busiest crossing between the U.S. and Canada, and the second-busiest truck crossing between the two countries, with more than 15,000 cars and trucks crossing the bridge on an average day. The Port Huron crossing facilitates approximately 14 percent of the truck trade between the United States and Canada.

After 9/11, increased border security processing resulted in congestion and delays at the Blue Water Bridge crossing. In 2002, Michigan DOT (MDOT) began the Blue Water Bridge Plaza Study to address improvements to the plaza and the I-94/I-69 Black River Corridor connections. Changes to the plaza and corridor were needed to:

- Enhance border security per Customs & Border Patrol
- Improve border processing and reduce congestion
- Accommodate projected traffic growth through 2030
- Provide a flexible facility that can adapt to future technologies and security concerns
- Facilitate the free flow of trade and travel at the Blue Water Bridge
- Increase the competitiveness of U.S. companies trading with Canada
- Improve access between Port Huron and the plaza
- Replace the aging Black River Bridge
- Improve the safety on the Black River Bridge and the I-94/I-69 corridor
- Improve traffic weaving movements east & west of the Water Street Interchange
- Create a more visible and accessible Welcome Center

Although a comprehensive stakeholder base was included in the public involvement process, there was considerable frustration regarding the scope of the project; the proposed solution, which had significant impacts on the City of Port Huron; and the project's purpose and need. Progress was slow and concerns were raised that the study process was taking too long and that funding could be redirected to other priorities. Communications between local stakeholders and the state and federal cooperating agencies stalled.

In 2007, the Project Team determined that an interactive strategy was needed to better inform and involve the local community and project stakeholders. A project office was opened in Port Huron, the BWB web site was expanded, and an e-mail listserv was created to provide an interactive public forum. A series of community workshops were held, with nearly 100 residents providing input on local traffic, neighborhood concerns and the "look and fit" of the new plaza. The greatest challenge to the Team was ensuring that the preferred alternative for the new plaza location and freeway re-alignment did not dominate the discussions.

In order to elicit meaningful participation and effective decision making, a smaller, interagency working group was formed to identify shared interests, understand local concerns, and develop project enhancements that would ensure a high quality transportation project that was integrated into the community. This group, called the Project Enhancement and Mitigation Group (PEM), was made up of local, state, and federal officials. The PEM Group met monthly covering specific enhancement and mitigation topics which were identified as areas of concern

through agency and public comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement, including economic development, local access and circulation, non-motorized circulation, natural environment, lost tax base, real estate, emergency services, maintaining traffic/construction staging, aesthetics, and plaza operations. Local subject area experts also attended the PEM Group meetings when appropriate, for example, when local access and circulation was discussed, representatives from the St. Clair County Road Commission participated.

As work with the PEM Group progressed, MDOT agreed to include the development of an Aesthetic Design Guide (ADG) as part of the Early Preliminary Engineering (EPE) Phase. Development of the ADG further established a working relationship with community stakeholders and continued MDOT's commitment to creating a project that supported the full range of user needs while respecting community context.

Using a collaborative stakeholder engagement process to establish the PEM working group allowed MDOT to get closure on the environmental clearance phase, to develop an ADG that expresses a dignified civic character within the City of Port Huron, and to move forward with Preliminary Design based on informed decisions. Forging a working partnership provided multiple, mutual benefits: communications improved, creative alternatives were considered and MDOT was better able to understand community values in order to respond with solutions tailored to resolving the problems identified.