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## Ohio River bridges legislation is done deal

By Lesley Stedman Weidenbener •  
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INDIANAPOLIS – The Ohio River Bridges project got another boost Tuesday when the General Assembly authorized the use of a public-private partnership with tolls to fund the \$4.1 billion construction cost.

Senate Bill 382 doesn't require the bi-state authority overseeing the project use tolls or a private partner. But it makes those options available.

Gov. Mitch Daniels praised it as a "very progressive measure" and said he plans to sign it into law.

"It definitely opens the door to what could be the breakthrough we've always wanted," Daniels said. "It's very far-sighted legislation. It's what every state ought to be doing – giving ourselves new tools and new possibilities for building things that otherwise would never happen."

The bill also authorizes the use of a public-private partnership to build a new toll road from Northwest Indiana to Illinois to alleviate Chicago area traffic.

The bill's author, Sen. Ed Charbonneau, R-Valparaiso, said the legislation allows state officials to begin talking with private investors about the projects "with credibility."

The measure passed the GOP-majority Senate unanimously on Tuesday. It had already passed the Democrat-controlled House 89-6.

Rep. Steve Stemler, D-Jeffersonville, said the bill "will have the most significant impact of anything I've done at the legislature to date."

"I think this is going to expedite this project,"

Stemler said. "It removes some of the impediments that have been in the way."

The bill reflects a marked change in legislative attitudes – particularly among Democrats – about using private partners to fund road projects.

Four years ago, Democrats tried unsuccessfully to block Daniels' lease of the Indiana Toll Road to a private firm for \$3.8 billion, money that is being funneled into other construction projects. The 75-year deal requires the private consortium Macquarie-Cintra to manage the road and make all upgrades in return for toll proceeds.

Now most Democrats are supporting the **funding method**. In fact, House Speaker Pat Bauer, D-South Bend, includes the measure in his list of caucus job-creation proposals.

For new construction projects, the partnerships often involve a private company agreeing to build a public project in exchange for revenue from tolls. It could also include the management of a project or just some piece of the construction.

In Kentucky, using a public-private partnership to fund and construct the bridges remains a somewhat controversial idea. But the Kentucky

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General Assembly generally deferred the decision to the bi-state authority.

That group's executive director, Steve Schultz, said Tuesday that the legislation is a "great show of support from Indiana."

"Last year, the Kentucky General Assembly paved the way for the creation of the bi-state authority and this new Indiana law helps define the framework in which the authority can develop its financial plan," Schultz said in a statement. "Ultimately, whatever solution we offer will need to work under the laws of both states, but at least now those laws are linked by a common goal in the Ohio River bridges project."

The \$4.1 billion project includes two bridges – one downtown and one on Louisville's east end.

Originally, Kentucky and Indiana leaders had planned to fund the bridges using state and federal tax revenue. But delays and escalating costs have forced the states to consider other alternatives.

## Unemployment fund

Indiana lawmakers remained divided Tuesday on how best to address Indiana's broken unemployment trust fund.

House and Senate negotiators met to hear testimony from business and labor groups about the issue, but did not discuss how to bridge the differences in the Senate and House versions of Senate Bill 23.

The Senate version calls for a one-year delay in the increase in unemployment premiums that was passed last year by the General Assembly. The House version repeals last year's legislation, including both the tax increase and other changes to the unemployment system, and included various worker-friendly provisions such as benefit increases.

## Townships

Reforms to reshape township government in Indiana remained far from reality Tuesday as lawmakers from the House and Senate continued to disagree on the best way to make those changes.

Negotiators trying to find middle ground on the varying versions of House Bill 1181 met for three hours, but no agreement seemed in sight.

The House's version of the bill calls for township-by-township referendums that would let voters decide whether to keep their township government, or abolish it and send those duties to the county to oversee. The Senate's version called for no referendums, and instead kept township government but eliminated township boards, putting county councils in charge of providing the fiscal oversight.

Sen. Connie Lawson, R-Danville, proposed that the bill be amended to call for referendums on whether to keep township advisory boards in townships that exceed a certain threshold of poor relief. In townships with a lower level of poor relief, there would be no referendum and the board would be abolished.

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But Rep. Bill Crawford, D-Indianapolis, said he would not agree to that. While he said he would accept one of Lawson's suggestions – that no public funds be used by townships to advertise their viewpoints to the public during the referendum process –he remained opposed to anything less than township-by-township referendums.

Reporter Lesley Stedman Weidenbener can be reached at (317) 444-2780. The Indianapolis Star contributed to this story.

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