

# HITA gets \$250,000 from state but far from solution to Harsens Island travel concerns



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It's been nearly two years since the public body charged with grappling with Harsens Island transportation concerns was brought back to life, and so far, those close to the discussion said all options to address them are still on the table.

The Harsens Island Transportation Authority got a state budget line item to help agency operations, as well as an update from the Detroit International Bridge Company still exploring its options earlier this year.

Now, as island residents brace for another ferry rate increase to get back and forth with mainland Clay Township, HITA Chairwoman Margie Baldwin said they're "going to continue to pursue" any available avenues to ensure "safe, reliable, affordable" options — whatever they are.

"There are also other options for bridges, looking at the possibility of a county bridge," Baldwin said. "We're not locked into anything, and this budget item ... will allow us to really do research and hire help and look at legal opportunities and get in front of decision-makers to improve transportation to the island."

The next HITA meeting is set for 4 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 12.

## What's gotten the discussion this far?

HITA itself was active decades ago but emerged once again in late 2019 and early 2020.

Although a state environmental permit request to build over the North Channel of the St. Clair River in 2016 was rejected, the Detroit International Bridge Company re-approached discussions about resurrecting the idea with HITA officials this summer.

A conceptual mitigation plan for a bascule bridge was shared with the authority and posted on its website in July in addition to other breakdowns about the project — similarly outlining

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community meeting when more information became available.

HITA officials have also looked into conducting a ferry rate survey, as Champion's is the only privately owned service in the state, inquiring about existing bridges, and touching on what would happen to Champion's if a local bridge was built.

State Sen. Dan Lauwers, R-Brockway Township, has helped both entities as a lawmaker.

First, as a state representative four years ago, he introduced a bill that made it easier for ferry operations like Champion's to adjust its rates. This year, he helped secure a one-time \$250,000 allocation for the local agency whose members have been critical of the ferry service.

It's an area where Lauwers admitted he's trying to accommodate a range of constituent needs, and he wasn't sure what role he may play in the future. On Monday, he said his goal was to find a "long-term solution to the transportation challenges of the island" — be it by helping a business or HITA, as it attempts to answer the same question.

"You had a government agency that knew absolutely nothing about ferry business making financial decisions for the ferry's private business owner," Lauwers said. Before a division of the Michigan State Police handled ferry rates, fare requests went before the Michigan Public Service Commission, reportedly taking months or years to get approval.

"... It's the only private ferry in the state of Michigan. Everyone else has access to (Public Act) 51 money."

"Like I said, that was considered and they decided not to do it a number of years ago before I was in office," Lauwers said, referring to decades-old ideas — some that islanders still talk about — that'd link Champion's up with a public agency like Blue Water Transit. "But maybe it's time to look at that again. I think that's what HITA is doing."

## **Baldwin: HITA 'desperate for the help of lawmakers'**

In addition to its fare increase, Champion's has run into concerns with limiting hours and backed up traffic, which its owners have attributed to a staffing shortage.

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“It’s their function to do so,” he said. “We don’t want to step on anybody’s toes or anything.”

And Lauwers said he isn’t looking to take “a seat at the table,” but rather, the same role he takes in anything else, trying “to give the resources to facilitate the opportunity.”

Still, Baldwin said one of their “greatest concerns” is that HITA’s members are all volunteers, who may still need more help.

“None of us are in government, and so, we’re really learning as we go and kind of making it up,” she said. “We are really desperate for the help of lawmakers to care about us. Even in talking to the state police about the increase, they shoved us off ... . It’s like nobody wants to care about us, and so we’re doing the best we can to say, ‘This isn’t working. And we’re going to get stranded on that island without resources, and we need help.’”

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