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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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2018 Annual Bridge Walk will start in both St. Ignace and Mackinaw City for safety, convenience

February 16, 2018 -- Focused on maintaining safety and maximizing participation, the Mackinac Bridge Authority (MBA) today voted to begin the event from both ends of the bridge - a change touted as the best way to keep the tradition alive.

With the decision, participants in the 2018 Annual Bridge Walk will start from whichever end of the bridge they arrive at, walking to the midpoint of the bridge before turning back. Walkers will be able to start anytime between 7 a.m. and noon, and walk as much of the bridge as they're able before the bridge reopens to traffic.

"We take very seriously the safety of all walkers and the busing issues during last year's walk that prevented many people from participating as they'd planned," said MBA Board Chairman William Gnodtke. "It's not a given that this event will continue forever, and while this is a big change, the Authority felt it is the best way to address those concerns and keep this 60-year tradition going."

A recording of the meeting will be available later today to view on the Michigan Department of Transportation's LiveStream channel at <https://livestream.com/MDOT/>.

This Labor Day, walkers will begin from both the St. Ignace and Mackinaw City ends of the bridge in one outside lane to the halfway point, then cross the center lanes of the bridge and head back to their starting point in the other outside lane. Those who wish to, and if they begin the walk early enough, will have the option to continue across the entire bridge. Those who do walk the full

length of the bridge will need to walk back across the bridge - for a 10-mile hike round trip - or make their own transportation arrangements to get back to the side they started from after the bridge reopens to public traffic. The center two lanes will remain open to emergency vehicles.

Board member Matthew McLogan, who voted in favor of starting the walk from both ends of the bridge, said that while it is a significant change, it allows continuation of an important tradition.

"This is probably the only viable option to preserve the walk," he said. "The only other realistic option is not to do it."

Gnodtke, who cast one of the "nay" votes in the 4-2 decision, said that while he loves the walk and has participated all but one year since his appointment to the board in 2002, the mission of the MBA is to maintain and preserve the bridge, not provide the Annual Bridge Walk.

"The cost far outweighs, as it applies to the Mackinac Bridge Authority, the benefit," he said.

The board had also considered two other options for the walk: one starting the walk in St. Ignace as has been done since 1965, and the other starting in Mackinaw City and ending in St. Ignace. Both of those options would have required the continued busing of participants to the starting line before or after the walk, which has been a significant expense for the event.

MBA staff expect the selected option for the walk will cost the Authority \$360,000 in 2018, primarily in staff time. The second option, walking north to south, would cost an estimated \$560,000, while the option of switching the walk direction would cost an estimated \$840,000.

At a special meeting in November, when the board decided to keep the walk on Labor Day for 2018, the Authority asked the communities of St. Ignace and Mackinaw City to develop plans for logistics and financial support of busing if it were to continue.

At today's meeting, representatives of businesses and tourism agencies in Mackinaw City presented a proposal for continuing busing for the event, but suggested the board raise the price to ride the bus to \$10 per person and seek corporate sponsorships to bear the remaining costs. A St. Ignace representative said the community will continue to provide free busing between Little Bear Arena and the north end of the bridge.

"As long as the Annual Bridge Walk continues, the MBA will undoubtedly bear a significant portion of the responsibility and expense," Gnodtke said. "The difficulty we've had in securing buses in the past, and the growing cost, make the option we selected that much easier to choose."

Every year, between 25,000 and 60,000 people from several states and countries come to the Mackinac Bridge for the Annual Bridge Walk, which has taken place since 1958, the year after the bridge opened to traffic. The event is still planned to begin at 6:40 a.m. with the start of the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness Jog, followed by a greeting from Gov. Rick Snyder at 6:55 a.m. Walkers will begin across the bridge at 7 a.m.

As it was last year, the bridge will remain closed to public traffic during the 2018 walk, at the recommendation of Michigan State Police (MSP) and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

The Authority also voted to not close the bridge for seven bicycle and pedestrian events that have crossed in past years, effectively ending those events. The decision followed recommendation from the MSP Emergency Management and Homeland Security Division to take steps to protect pedestrians and bicyclists during other special events on the bridge, including the possibility of closing the bridge.

The events that won't continue include the Memorial Bridge Run in May, the Big Mac Spring Bike Tour in June, the DALMAC, the Law Enforcement Torch Run, Bike the Mighty Mac, the Mighty Mac Bridge Race in September, and the Fall Colors Bridge Race in October. Other vehicle crossing events on the bridge can continue as in the past.

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