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Mackinac Bridge Authority to reinstate driver assistance and other services with increased fees

Fast facts:

- **The driver assistance program, in which an MBA employee drives a customer's passenger vehicle, motorcycle, or commercial vehicle across the bridge, was used by 2,559 customers in 2019.**
- **The service, suspended due to COVID-19 pandemic concerns, will resume Nov. 1.**
- **Previously offered at no charge, the MBA will now charge \$10 per trip to defray the cost of the service.**

October 14, 2021 -- The Mackinac Bridge Authority (MBA) today voted to reinstate its suspended driver assistance program on Nov. 1, along with the pedestrian, bicyclist, and snowmobile transportation programs.

Based on recommendations from staff and the authority's Fees, Fares and Classifications Committee, reinstatement of those programs will include an increase in fees for services, as well as revised liability waivers and hold harmless agreements. The four programs have been suspended since March 13, 2020, as a proactive step to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 between customers of the bridge and staff.

"Suspending these popular programs was a difficult decision, but one that was necessary based on what we knew then about this ongoing pandemic," said Authority Chairman Patrick "Shorty" Gleason. "As our committee and staff have examined these programs, it became clear that reinstatement should come with changes to address staff concerns and costs of the services provided, as the programs have been provided at a net loss for the Authority."

The MBA previously evaluated the costs of these services in 2005; the latest review included updated costs for staff wages and equipment.

The driver assistance program, in which an MBA employee drives a customer's passenger vehicle, motorcycle, or commercial vehicle across the bridge, has been offered since the 1980s. Users of the program often have concerns or fears of driving across the bridge, particularly during windy conditions, but many have said they used the service so they could take photos while crossing or take a break from driving. In 2019, 2,559 customers used the service, which previously was offered for no charge aside from the usual bridge toll for the vehicle type driven.

To help defray the average cost of roughly \$33 per trip for the program, the MBA will begin charging \$10 per trip when the program resumes, and \$15 per trip starting Jan. 1, 2025. The required liability waiver form has been updated, and staff will complete a checklist of several items the customer must agree to, including allowing for adjustments of mirrors and the driver's seat, using a dash camera to record the inside of the vehicle during the crossing, keeping any animals in the vehicle restrained, having all occupants wear a mask covering their nose and mouth, and allowing the vehicle to be cleaned before crossing.

"We understand that some customers need this assistance to cross the bridge, but we must insist that they comply with several conditions for the safety and comfort of our staff," Gleason said.

Pedestrians and bicyclists must cross the Mackinac Bridge in a vehicle, so the MBA has provided transport services for them since the bridge opened to traffic Nov. 1, 1957. Prior to the program's suspension, pedestrians were charged \$3.50 each to be driven across the bridge; bicyclists were charged \$5 for them to be transported with their bicycle. The new fee will be \$5 for pedestrians, and \$15 for bicyclists.

An average of 793 pedestrians and 375 bicyclists have used the program annually in recent years. The average cost to the MBA to provide the service is \$23.21 per pedestrian, and \$32.50 per bicyclist.

Since the early 1990s, the MBA has provided a snowmobile transport service, as snowmobilers are not allowed to ride across the bridge. Prior to suspension, the fee for the service was \$15 per snowmobile and rider, with additional riders charged \$3.50. The new fee will be \$20, with additional riders charged \$5.

An average of just more than 1,000 snowmobiles have been transported through the service annually in recent years, with roughly four snowmobiles transported per trip. The average cost to the MBA for each trip is \$61.30.

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