



CONNECTING NEIGHBORS

MDOT I-75 Ambassador Bridge Gateway Project

WELCOME

October/November 2007

Issue 2

This is the second issue of "Connecting Neighbors," the bi-monthly newsletter designed to give you information about the MDOT Ambassador Bridge Gateway Project. Read about the positive impact that the project is having on Mexicantown, one of Detroit's most vibrant neighborhoods. See "What's Happening Now" on the construction front. Sign up to get "Gateway Connection" maps and detour information for the February 2008 closure of I-75 from Rosa Parks to Clark Street when they become available. Want even more information? Visit www.michigan.gov/gateway.

MDOT Ambassador Bridge Gateway Project Opens a New Era for Mexicantown

Avenue and surrounding areas of the Southwest Detroit district bustled with commerce, area residents interacted with visitors, and prosperity reigned. Through the collaborative efforts of the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT), the Mexicantown Community Development Corporation (MCDC), and community groups, Rodriguez and neighborhood advocates anticipate that the MDOT Ambassador Bridge Gateway Project, with its Detroit Mexicantown International Welcome Center and Mercado, will usher in a return to these glory days. This project is the most ambitious that Mexicantown has witnessed in decades.

"We wanted to make it more than a welcome center. We wanted it to be a way for people to experience all the neighborhood has to offer – the food and the shops – all the things that have been involved in the community's evolution," says Rodriguez. "Most people were saying, 'You guys are just dreaming,' but we never lost hope."

For several years, an open-air mercado or marketplace was a landmark and center of activity in Mexicantown, but there was no destination that compared to the Port Huron Welcome Center, which receives travelers from all over Canada and the U.S., Rodriguez says. MCDC thought there should be something more permanent to serve as an "anchor" and landmark to the area. The then-proposed MDOT Ambassador Bridge Gateway Project served as an opportunity for the State to help the neighborhood pursue its vision. In 1992 MCDC submitted a plan to MDOT for a facility to house a welcome center, office and retail space. Ten years later, MDOT and MCDC signed a Memorandum of Understanding to build an international welcome center and mercado.

Construction on the MDOT Ambassador Bridge Gateway Project began in 2003; and is due to be completed in 2009. Designed to improve access to and from the Ambassador Bridge, which brings travelers from Canada into Detroit through Mexicantown, its plans include:

- Re-construction of sections of I-75 and I-96 and a new interchange for those freeways.
- A state-of-the-art pedestrian bridge across I-75, connecting east and west Mexicantown.
- New lighting, landscaping and other enhancements.

Culture Alert!

In May, it's Cinco de Mayo ... from mid-September to mid-October, Hispanic Heritage Month. These are just two of the many occasions for celebration honoring Hispanic culture held in Mexicantown throughout the year. Keep an eye on the Mexicantown Web site for upcoming events. In the meantime, don't miss the upcoming Dia de Muertos (Day of the Dead) Walking Tour on Thursday Nov. 1, from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., and Friday Nov. 2, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., at the Mexicantown Mercado & Plaza, 2826 Bagley Ave. These unique cultural events are fun for all ages. The celebration includes a free tour of public ofrendas in the Mexicantown district and, of course, during the event you can shop for Mexican crafts, imports, jewelry, Dia de Muertos items and more.



Photo credit to Larry Peplin



MDOT Transportation Planner Andy Zeigler has worked with the Mexicantown community on the MDOT Gateway Project for almost 15 years.

In addition to the project that MDOT is undertaking, the Detroit International Bridge Company (DIBC) is redesigning and rebuilding the Ambassador Bridge Plaza.

MDOT transportation planner Andy Zeigler, who has been directly involved with community planning around the project for almost 15 years, says the advantages will include improved traffic access from the border crossing and the likelihood of greater tourism and economic investment in the historic neighborhood.

“We think there are a number of economic, safety and aesthetic benefits. What it offers the community is a certainty of well-being for the entire area,” Zeigler says. “The improved flow of transportation will stimulate greater travel, which will, in turn, stimulate interest in visiting Mexicantown and the rest of Michigan.”

Zeigler also notes that residents and visitors alike will be able to access Mexicantown even while the project is under construction. “MDOT’s aim will be to make it as efficient as possible to get in and around the area even as these improvements are made,” he says.

While the upcoming construction for the MDOT Gateway Project will be challenging, collaboration between MDOT and Mexicantown’s civic leaders and residents has been a positive, says Zeigler: “I have thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to interact with the people of Mexicantown. MDOT usually adopts a theme for each

of its major reconstruction projects. The theme for this project is ‘Connecting Neighbors,’ which is exactly what is happening here at both the local and international levels.”

Historically, Mexicantown has seen challenges. First established in the 19th century, it drew Mexican and Latino families increasingly throughout the 1920s. Detroit’s first Mexican church and social and civic organizations were established, but the district’s growth was briefly interrupted by the Great Depression. Eventually, in the 1950s, a new wave of immigrants arrived. A Spanish-language movie theater, along with nightclubs, grocery stores and other retail outlets, were built.

Following the construction of the I-75 freeway that cut through the community, however, many residents began closing shop and relocating. In 1989, MCDC was formed to address the challenges caused by a general economic decline in the city and in southwest Detroit and Mexicantown.

Mercado = Marketplace = Shopping

The Mercado is the place to shop for unique gifts reflective of Hispanic heritage and culture. Go from Maya’s Jewelry and the Felicidades Gift Shop to MexiCandle Gift Shop and the Jewelry Center. The Mercado is located on Mexicantown Plaza at 2826 Bagley Avenue in Detroit. To learn more about the Mercado and other stores and restaurants located in Mexicantown, visit the directory at www.mexicantown.org.

Ken Koehler and his wife, Tammy Alfaro, own the Honeybee Market, which has served Mexicantown for 50 years. Alfaro and Koehler recently opened a 15,000-square-foot building next door to the old site of the market into which they will move the business. The couple looks forward to the new customers and visitors whom they expect to serve once the MDOT Ambassador Bridge Gateway Project is complete.

“One of the things that I’ve actually seen, coming off the bridge for many years, is there was never anything there at the end of it,” says Koehler. “I think just being able to have people get off the bridge and have someplace to go, it should draw a lot of people into the area. We’re very excited and looking forward to it.”

Rodriguez agrees: “The Welcome Center is a real asset. It’s a huge asset.”

Featuring office and retail space, the Detroit Mexicantown International Welcome Center and Mercado is also expected to create jobs. Already, DTE Energy has posted employment openings for bilingual customer service representatives to work from its space in the facility. As many as 100 other jobs are expected to result within the next several years.

In addition to economic benefits from the MDOT Gateway Project and Welcome Center, Rodriguez says there will be a patriotic symbolism associated with Mexicantown. It will be a greeting point for travelers across the northern border.

“It’s finally going to say, ‘Welcome to Detroit, welcome to Michigan, welcome to the United States of America,’” she says. “It’ll make them say, ‘Wait a minute. Let’s not get on that freeway so quickly.’”

Visit Mexicantown!

Located in southwest Detroit, Mexicantown is now open and will be completely accessible during all phases of the MDOT Ambassador Bridge Gateway project. To learn more about the neighborhood, its restaurants, businesses, cultural and community activities, access the Mexicantown Web site at www.mexicantown.org.

Photo credit to Larry Peplin



The Detroit Mexicantown International Welcome Center and Mercado is the outcome of a partnership between MDOT, Mexicantown CDC and the community. At the October 2006 ribbon cutting event were (lt. to rt.) State Representative Steve Tobocman, Wayne County Executive Robert Ficano, Governor Jennifer Granholm, Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, MCDC President Maria Elena Rodriguez, U.S. Representative Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick, U.S. Senator Carl Levin, U.S. Senator Debbie Stabenow, Capital Campaign Chair Fern Espino, MCDC Board Chairman Hector Hernandez, former MCDC Vice President Margaret Garry.



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MDOT I-75 Ambassador Bridge Gateway Project

WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW?



Preliminary Construction Continues

The preliminary construction phase of the project continues to move ahead. Preliminary construction is the advance prep work that paves the way for major construction scheduled to start in late February 2008. These photos were taken in and around the Mexicantown area in early August. This early work is expected to run through December and includes changes to underground utilities and water mains along with the construction of a retaining wall along the SB I-75 Service Drive at Bagley.



New Signs Offer Glimpse of the Future

Want to know what the future looks like? Then be on the lookout for the new MDOT Ambassador Bridge Gateway Project signs (below) that MDOT is placing in strategic locations in Mexicantown and throughout the project area. They offer a sneak peek at what the project will look like when completed, including the new pedestrian bridge, lighting, landscaping, and other enhancements.

The Ambassador Bridge Gateway Project

The Ambassador Bridge Gateway Project is a major freeway reconstruction effort that will enhance commercial access to the U.S.-Canada border crossing while improving traffic flow and safety on local roads. Phase 4 of the project, which began in summer 2007, will include a reconstructed I-75/I-96 interchange with new connections to the Ambassador Bridge Plaza as well as a cable-stay pedestrian bridge that spans the freeway to connect east and west Mexicantown. Phase 4 is expected to open to traffic by December 2009.

Funding Partners: The Federal Highway Administration, the Michigan Department of Transportation, the City of Detroit, and the Detroit International Bridge Company.

For more information about the project, please visit www.michigan.gov/Gateway

The Ambassador Bridge Gateway Project I-75 and I-96, West Grand Boulevard to US-12 (Michigan Avenue)



HNTB



CONNECTING NEIGHBORS
MDOT I-75 Ambassador Bridge Gateway Project



Proyecto Ambassador Bridge Gateway de MDOT

El Proyecto Ambassador Bridge Gateway, del Departamento de Transporte de Michigan (MDOT, por sus siglas en inglés), es un enorme esfuerzo de reconstrucción que mejorará el acceso comercial al cruce fronterizo EUA-Canadá, a su vez optimizando el flujo y seguridad del tráfico local. La Fase 4 del proyecto, la cual comenzó en verano del 2007, incluirá una reconstrucción de la intersección I-75/I-96 con nuevas conexiones a Mexicantown, el Puente Internacional Ambassador y al puente peatonal sobre la I-75 conectando este y oeste de Mexicantown. La Fase 4 estará abierta al tráfico normal en diciembre de 2009.

Socios: The Federal Highway Administration, the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT), la Ciudad de Detroit, y Detroit International Bridge Company.

Para mayor información del proyecto, por favor visite: www.michigan.gov/Gateway

Psst, Help Spread the Word

MDOT is developing an MDOT Gateway Project brochure with maps and key information for motorists once freeway reconstruction begins in late February 2008. We have also created a newsletter for area residents, businesses and other stakeholders. Our goal is to distribute this information to as many people as possible, especially those who live or work in areas that will be directly affected by the construction. **There are three ways you can help:**

- By distributing brochures and newsletters to your customers and employees or just making them available at your place of business – this can be a retail establishment, restaurant, community center, religious institution or other organization.
- By sending us the e-mail addresses of your constituents, customers, employees, etc., so that we can send newsletters and project updates as soon as they become available.
- By including the Web address to the MDOT Ambassador Bridge Gateway Project Web site – in your organization’s newsletters, weekly bulletins or announcements – or linking it to your Web site. The Web address is www.michigan.gov/gateway. The site includes frequently asked questions, dates and times for upcoming community meetings and a downloadable version of this newsletter. Detour maps also will be available in advance of the 2008 closures.

If you would like copies of the brochures and/or newsletter to distribute, or know others you think should receive information by e-mail, contact the “Gateway Connection” at MDOTgateway@loviogeorgeinc.com or by fax at 248-569-3103. Your information will be used to send MDOT Ambassador Bridge Gateway Project information only when it becomes available.

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MDOT Region Office
18101 West Nine Mile Rd.
Southfield, MI 48075



Michigan Department of Transportation
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