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MDOT Opens New Vernor Avenue Ramp, but Others Must Remain Closed

To discuss the current situation with the community, MDOT will be holding a meeting on Tuesday, Oct. 20, from 7 to 8 p.m. on the second floor of the Detroit Mexicantown International Welcome Center, 2835 Bagley Ave. in southwest Detroit.

The goal of the meeting is for MDOT's Gateway Team to respond to community questions and concerns, and to solicit ideas for making adjustments to improve mobility on local streets until the conflict is resolved.

"We want the community to be aware that MDOT may be forced to keep the ramps closed for an indefinite period of time," said Kratofil. "It depends totally on how quickly the court acts, or whether DIBC decides to abide by its agreements. In the meantime, if there are modifications that we can make to improve the current situation for area residents, we are very open to doing so."

Though the opening of these access ramps has been delayed, work continues on other parts of the Gateway Project. (See What's Happening Now on page 2 for further project updates.)

"We continue to make real progress on MDOT's portion of the Gateway Project, which is now 95 percent complete. And, as always, we thank both area residents and commuters for their patience while we continue to get the work done," said Kratofil. "But the most important thing that we want everyone to know is that we are not walking away from the Gateway Project; we will see it through to completion as promised."

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Issue 11

WELCOME



CONNECTING NEIGHBORS

MDOT I-75 Ambassador Bridge Gateway Project

Welcome to the 11th edition of Connecting Neighbors, the newsletter designed to keep you up-to-date about MDOT's I-75 Ambassador Bridge Gateway Project. Have you heard about the public art project that's part of the Gateway Project? Do you know what percentage of the project is complete? Do you know what new ramp will soon open so that motorists will be able to drive directly into Mexicantown from the I-75 freeway, or why MDOT is forced to keep other ramps closed indefinitely? The answers to these questions – and more – are inside.

MDOT Opens New Vernor Avenue Ramp, but Others Must Remain Closed

On Oct. 23, the Gateway Project reaches another major milestone: the opening of the northbound ramp from the I-75 freeway to Vernor Avenue. Once this key entry point to

the community is back on-line, motorists will be able to drive directly to the restaurants, bakeries and other businesses in Mexicantown and southwest Detroit.

"The overall goal of MDOT's \$230 million Ambassador Bridge Gateway Project is to make the flow of people and goods through and around this vital transportation corridor as efficient and effective as possible for the benefit of the local and national economy," said Metro Region Engineer Tony Kratofil. "What that really boils down to is supporting existing businesses and encouraging economic growth in local communities like Mexicantown and southwest Detroit."

This new ramp, and all Gateway infrastructure improvements, will benefit the citizens of Michigan in a number of ways. These include supporting billions of dollars in annual trade at the Detroit-Windsor international border crossing and helping to retain existing jobs, while fostering the development of new ones. While the northbound I-75 ramp to Vernor Avenue will soon be operating again for the benefit of local residents and businesses, that will not be the case for these three newly constructed ramps:

- The local and northbound I-75 ramp to the Ambassador Bridge Plaza
- The eastbound I-96 and southbound I-75 ramp to the Ambassador Bridge Plaza
- The Ambassador Bridge Truck Plaza to southbound I-75 and westbound I-96

These ramps, designed to eliminate truck traffic from the local streets and to improve the flow of traffic at the border, will remain closed for the foreseeable future and the temporary traffic pattern will remain in place. All ramps have posted detours, and access to and from Canada and the local neighborhoods will be maintained at all times.



In July, members of MDOT's Gateway Team joined with community residents and local officials to celebrate the opening of the I-75 freeway between Rosa Parks Boulevard and Clark Street. On Oct. 23, another celebration will be held to mark the opening of the Vernor Avenue bridge and the exit from northbound I-75 to Vernor Avenue.

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Artist, Mexicantown Work Together to Bring Beauty to the Gateway Project

“What are the three words that best describe your community?”
 “How would you describe the culture of your neighborhood to a visitor?”

These are two of the questions that a group of Mexicantown residents were asked to consider at a community meeting one evening in early September.

The questioner was Detroit artist Hubert Massey, chosen from among 46 applicants who vied for the opportunity to create public art for the MDOT Ambassador Bridge Gateway Project. The art, which will be located around the east apron plaza of the Bagley Avenue Pedestrian Bridge, will be funded by a federal grant secured by MDOT and will be one of the final finishing touches on the project. Massey was chosen to create the artwork because of the glowing references he received from former clients and because he was receptive to including the community in the creative process.

The purpose of the meeting, the first of two hosted by MDOT to bring Massey and the community together, was for the artist to capture the thoughts and opinions of community residents so that this information could be used to shape the art project.

At the first meeting, on Sept. 8, the artist shared his creative philosophy that art should reflect the community that surrounds it. He then called upon those in attendance to describe their city and their neighborhood. A lively discussion ensued.

Some of the comments from the audience:

“This neighborhood has a strong heartbeat” ... “The city has a crusty exterior, but a warm interior” ... “Detroiters see opportunities where others don’t” ... “Resilient” ... “Transformative” ... “It is the story of immigrants” ... “We have a tradition of innovation.” ... “Life spirals on in the community.”

Between the first meeting and the second, Massey spoke to more residents, visited neighborhood sites including St. Anne’s Catholic Church, and conducted research to find textiles and other artifacts that represented the community.

At the much-anticipated second meeting, on Sept. 29, Massey presented preliminary sketches for three works. The first, a massive mosaic mural, 5 feet high and 38 feet long, would grace the Bagley Avenue Pedestrian Bridge. His sketch included images that chronicle the diverse cultures, innovation, strength and resilience of the city.

The second, a cement and granite sculpture about 5 feet tall, would be located on the plaza in front of the welcome center and the Mercado. It would be part of a park-like setting with greenery and benches all around. The proposed spiral-shaped work would tell the story of the Mexicantown community through the use of pictographs. It would also serve as a community monument. There would be space on the sculpture so that each year a committee could choose a person who has contributed to the community and add his or her name to the statue.

The third proposed work is a 10-foot-tall polished aluminum statue with a brass globe featuring Michigan and Canada, representing Michigan’s place in the world and its international connection to Canada.

The crowd responded warmly to Massey’s sketches, telling him what they liked but also recommending changes that they felt would bring his preliminary ideas even more in line with the community’s aesthetic.

Once Massey refines his concepts, he will take them to the Public Art Selection Committee (PASC) for final approval before the work gets underway. The PASC is comprised of representatives from the local community, the Detroit arts community, key project members and MDOT. Working together, this group selected the artist and will remain involved through completion of the project.

MDOT Transportation Planner Andy Zeigler, who has been guiding the art project, was excited by the community response. “The art project is designed to capture the voice and the legacy of the community. Many people have really embraced this part of the Gateway Project,” said Zeigler. “The beauty of the pedestrian plaza will encourage tourism and have a positive economic impact on the businesses in Mexicantown and southwest Detroit.”



Artist Hubert Massey, seen here at a meeting with local residents, will use images of pride and heritage from the surrounding community, to create the Gateway Public Art Project.



CONNECTING NEIGHBORS
 MDOT I-75 Ambassador Bridge Gateway Project

WHAT’S HAPPENING NOW?



The Gateway Project is now more than 95 percent complete! By now, of course, everyone knows that the I-75 freeway between Rosa Parks Boulevard and Clark Street reopened to traffic in early July, a full five months ahead of schedule. The latest news: the Vernor Highway bridge is complete and the northbound ramp from I-75 to Vernor Avenue is slated to open on Oct. 23. Once it’s up and running, traffic will be able to enter Mexicantown directly from the I-75 freeway. (That means direct access to all those wonderful restaurants again!)

Work continues on the Bagley Avenue pedestrian bridge plazas, which are more than 50 percent complete. Many items are under way, such as landscaping, guardrails, sidewalks, fences and permanent signs. The service drives also are under construction. Overall, the Gateway Project remains ahead of schedule and is expected to be completed by June 2010.

MDOT photographer Jim LeMay has been documenting the progress of the Gateway in both land-based and aerial photography. These photos were taken in December 2008, and May and September 2009. See if you can put them in the correct order.



Continued from page 1

MDOT Opens New Vernor Avenue Ramp, but Others Must Remain Closed

The delay in opening these ramps is a result of the Detroit International Bridge Company’s (DIBC) refusal to construct its portion of the Gateway Project in accordance with the design agreed upon by DIBC

and MDOT, with the approval of the city of Detroit, Federal Highway Administration, SEMCOG, and concurrence by GSA, U.S. Customs, and U.S. Homeland Security. The parties entered into several contracts that identified the various structures, roads, and ramps that each party would construct to directly connect the Ambassador Bridge to the interstate highways and remove truck traffic from local streets. While MDOT has honored these agreements, DIBC has not. This divergence from the agreed upon plan by DIBC makes it impossible for MDOT to open the new ramps.

Currently, MDOT is pursuing its legal rights in Wayne County Circuit Court to resolve this problem. Until the court acts, or DIBC decides to honor its agreements, the ramps cannot be opened to traffic.

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