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SWARTZ CREEK

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SWARTZ CREEK - Just when the city thought they crossed that bridge, they're crossing it again. Months after the city voted to refuse a state grant to fix the Raubinger Road bridge, which required a \$145,000 to \$160,000 match from the city, the county is raising the issue for discussion yet again.

In a letter to Swartz Creek, the county is proposing that the city turn jurisdiction of the bridge over to the county and pay half of the matching portion. In turn, the county would pay the other half, along with Gaines Township, whose residents also use the bridge.

The letter asks that the city to respond by Sept. 7.

"The winner will be both," John Daly, manager/director of the Genesee County Road Commission, said about Swartz Creek and Gaines Township. "It seems like it's in the best interest of residents in Swartz Creek and residents in Gaines Township that it be fixed."

The city received a \$550,000 state grant to fix the bridge, which borders the city and Gaines Township. The grant expires in September 2008. City officials have argued that the bridge primarily serves township residents and the township should equally share in the cost to repair it. But for two years, city officials said, the township has refused to weigh in on the issue. Earlier this year the city suggested the two municipalities consider sharing the cost equally, but the Township Board never voted on the issue. On April 23, in a split vote, the City Council voted to refuse the grant money.

"We could never get them to give us any answers, so we decided to shut down the project," said City Manager Paul Bueche, adding that the city hasn't contacted the state to refuse the grant. The city earlier this year held a public meeting on the issue, requesting input from both township and city residents. Nancy Ocenasek, who lives in the city, said some residents never were notified of the meeting.

She's among some residents on the road who support keeping the bridge open, saying if it closes motorists would have to take Morrish or Elms roads into town. She said the bridge also helps the local economy.

"They come into town, use our local grocery stores, the parishes," she said. "The township contributes to the economic value of the city."

Township Supervisor Paul Fortino also supports the county's proposal.

"Of course we want it open. It puts a lot of pressure on other roads," he said.

If the proposal is approved by the city, the township would pay a percentage of the match under a formula calculated by the county.

"There are four places you can go north/south. When you reduce the Raubinger Road bridge, you reduce it by a quarter," Fortino said.

But city leaders aren't as enthusiastic about the plan.

"It would take some new news to change my mind on it," said Mayor Pro-Tem Jason Christie, who voted in April to refuse the grant. He said the city's matching portion instead could be used

to fix local roads. "I feel strongly the bridge issue is dead."

The bridge became part of the city when it incorporated in 1959, according to Bueche. The city also owns about 300 yards south of the bridge to the railroad tracks, which the county is proposing also be transferred to the county so that the bridge is contiguous to the Genesee County road system.

Daly said the county by law can only spend money on roads in its jurisdiction, therefore, couldn't contribute to the Raubinger Road Bridge unless it was transferred to the county.

Daly said the county's proposal is unusual, however, he said the Raubinger Road Bridge, like bridges across the state, are crucial to the economy.

"You don't want to see any bridge not repaired," he said, adding that the county did not have a traffic count for the bridge. "It's extremely important to the economy of this county. It controls access to the southeast side of town."

Christie said the county should have intervened earlier.

"It's a little disappointing for the county to come to us with a proposal now," he said. "We've been trying to get (the issue resolved) for two years to no avail."

Daly said if the city refuses the grant, it's unlikely the bridge will ever be repaired and eventually would close.

"If you turn the bridge money back in, the chances at any point of the bridge getting funding is virtually zero."

City officials have invited Daly to attend the Aug. 27 City Council meeting.

"Other than fixing the bridge, there is no ulterior motive," Daly said, adding that he did plan to address the council on the proposal.