

Wilson Bridge critics warn of growing price tag

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Opponents of the planned 12-lane Woodrow Wilson Bridge say the project is bound for costly overruns and that splitting its ownership between Maryland and Virginia is unconstitutional.

Judith A. McVay and Bert Ely, chairwoman and legislative chairman of the Coalition for a Sensible Bridge Inc., made the comments Wednesday at a news conference at the Lyceum in Alexandria.

Ely said underestimated costs and project overruns — as seen in the Springfield "Mixing Bowl" Interchange — are bound to occur.

"The project's cost has been significantly underestimated," Ely said. "It's conceivable the cost will be \$3.5 billion to \$4 billion."

The official price tag is \$2.45 billion for 7½ miles of roadway including the bridge and multiple interchanges in

Maryland and Virginia.

With each state responsible for paying for its cost overruns, Maryland is carrying the burden of building the bridge superstructure, everything visible above the water line. The lone bid to construct the bridge came in nearly \$400 million over budget and will be rebid in pieces, Maryland officials have said.

"Our belief is that Maryland will come to the Federal Highway Administration and say Virginia has to chip in more money," Ely said.

Congress has stated that it will not increase its \$1.5 billion contribution for the project.

Midway through Wednesday's news conference, bridge project spokesman John Undeland entered the room.

"John, you were not invited," Ely shouted from the podium. "Please leave."

When Undeland tried to take a copy of written materials provided to reporters, Ely said Undeland was "not entitled" to

the documents.

Undeland left the room empty-handed and waited elsewhere in the building for the press conference to conclude.

In addition to the budget, the press conference was designed to highlight what Philip M. Marston, an Alexandria attorney and activist with the coalition, said is a constitutional flaw in the interstate compact. He said such an agreement must be approved by Congress, which required an appointed 13-member board to oversee spending and construction.

"When I saw the interstate compact, I went ballistic," Marston said.

He said a local jurisdiction would have a better chance than the coalition in suing the federal government over the matter to force the project to create a governing body. The coalition, he said, would not be a represented party on the board, while the city would have a vote on the board along with other impacted jurisdictions.

Contacted Wednesday afternoon, Alexandria City Attorney Ignacio Pessoa said he was aware of the coalition's arguments and is considering the issues raised.

"Their arguments are intriguing, and I'm in the process of reviewing the materials," Pessoa said. "I will come to a conclusion in the near future."

Pessoa said he doubted the city would benefit from appointment of a formal governing board.

"Given the complexity of the project and the inherent conflicts that occur, [the relationship] is as good as could be expected," Pessoa said. "We wouldn't have a controlling majority on a board if there was one. We wouldn't necessarily get anything better than what we have now."

Undeland said while a governing board was initially considered, it was later amended out of the final congressional legislation approving the Wilson

Bridge project. He said the board is not needed.

"Local residents do have a voice [in the project]," Undeland said. "We listen we make accommodations. We're taking concrete steps to be a good neighbor."

Undeland said revamping the project now would require a two- to three-year delay because the process would have to start over, including a new environmental impact statement.

While most of the Wilson Bridge project is scheduled for completion by 2007, other features will take shape from 2008 to 2011, including the phased reconstruction of the Telegraph Road interchange on the Capital Beltway.

Maryland is overseeing the majority of the construction to replace the existing six-lane, 42-year-old span linking Oxon Hill, Md., and Alexandria. The new 12-lane, dual-span drawbridge carries the Capital Beltway across the Potomac River.