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613-271-0440 613-271-0967





Bridging borders

Keith Regan learns how ongoing investments by the Niagara Falls Bridge Commission in three spans over the Niagara River reflect a long-term mission to provide the infrastructure necessary to make border crossing as streamlined as possible

Niagara Falls is one of the world's most popular vacation and honeymoon destinations, a natural wonder to which millions flock from around the world each year. For most of them, as well as thousands of trucks hauling freight between the United States and Canada, getting to Niagara Falls means crossing an international border via one of the bridges controlled by the Niagara Falls Bridge Commission.

Formed by a joint resolution of Congress in 1938

to manage what was then the only connection, the Rainbow Bridge, the Commission oversees a rebuilt Rainbow Bridge as well as the Whirlpool Bridge and the Lewiston-Queenston Bridge, all of which connect the US to Canada over the Niagara River. Taken together, the three bridges make up the second-busiest port of entry with Canada after Kennedy International Airport, with some 12 million passages annually. The volume of commercial traffic is astounding, with \$26 billion worth of goods crossing the bridges annually, or about \$3 million every hour.

Although traffic has ebbed in recent years—first in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks and more recently as the economy slowed—the Commission remains focused on providing the infrastructure necessary to make passage over the border and through Customs as streamlined as possible for passenger vehicles and commercial truck traffic alike.

“There are a lot of factors that impact whether people cross the border, but we continue our relationships with Customs and the different agencies involved to try to do what we can to facilitate the movement of traffic,” says the Commission’s general manager, Lew Holloway, who assumed that position in January 2009.

Holloway works for an eight-member commission made up of equal representation from the US and Canadian governments. The agency gets most of its funding from tolls collected on both sides of the bridges as well as some third-party vendor leases.

With the Customs plaza on the Rainbow Bridge recently rebuilt and all three bridges recently

double Customs space and increase automobile lanes from six to ten is scheduled to begin in spring 2009 and be completed by summer 2011. The Commission has extensive experience with phasing projects to make sure the work itself doesn’t adversely impact traffic while it is being done, says Brent Gallagher, manager of agency relations and security for the Commission. “We’ve been through it a number of times and have a pretty good handle on how to phase projects so that traffic can move smoothly,” he adds.

One of the first steps for the project was the construction of a parking

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painted—an \$80 million undertaking—the Commission shifted its focus to both sides of the Lewiston-Queenston span, which in 2005 was expanded from four fixed lanes to five reversible lanes, providing added flexibility for managing traffic. A long-term project to upgrade the plazas on the bridge began in 2007 with Phase 1 of the project. This phase, costing \$47 million and recently completed, ungraded the number of toll lanes from four to six and increased the Customs commercial lanes from three to five. Also included in the project were a new toll and maintenance building, a four-level parking garage and a storage building. Related work included adding a truck lane to Route 405, which leads to the bridge toward the United States.

Attention is now being focused on Phase 2 of the project at the Canadian side of the L-Q Bridge, where an \$80 million expansion to more than

garage for Customs and border workers, a move that created room for the expansion work to be done without impacting the existing facilities.

The upgrades to the L-Q Bridge could also bring a number of environmental improvements and other ancillary benefits, notes Holloway, who joined the Commission after 20 years of working in municipal positions in the Niagara region.

Faster passage through Customs will reduce idling time for traffic, which in turn should lead to cleaner air in the area. The project also includes \$750,000 worth of landscaping improvements to the plaza, and the Toll House and Customs building will feature a green roof to help mitigate stormwater runoff. A new water line has been extended to the plazas and will provide dramatically improved water quality and eliminate the need to provide bottled water to employees on the site.

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Bondfield offers design build, construction and project management services in addition to its general contracting capabilities and constructs buildings in the commercial and institutional sectors throughout Ontario.

We appreciated the opportunity to work with the Niagara Falls Bridge Commission and its construction team on the successful completion of Phase One of the Queenston Plaza Redevelopment project, and look forward to the prospect of working together on other future projects.



The improvements will also enhance security, with perimeter fencing and security cameras. Also, for the first time, the entire plaza will have a fully redundant power supply, thanks to the on-site emergency generators being installed. “Technology has significantly advanced since the bridges and plazas were first built,” says Holloway. “As we make these changes, we can really make an improvement in environmental, safety, security and traffic flow efficiencies.”

Along with the capital improvements and ongoing maintenance, the Commission also works to keep traffic flowing by keeping drivers informed of the wait times at each of the spans. Message board signs detailing the wait times are posted on all major roadways approaching the border, and the Commission also uses the area news media to get out word of construction work

or other factors that could cause delays.


“We have wonderful resources and facilities, and part of the work is in getting people to the right bridges at the right time,” says Victor Montalbo, manager of administration and finance for the Commission. The Commission works closely with a number of agencies to make that happen, including the Customs and Border Protection agencies in both countries, the New York State Department of Transportation and the Ontario Ministry of Transportation to direct people to the facilities where there are resources. “We do our best to get the word out via public service announcements and the media so that those Customs resources are being utilized in the most efficient way, and we’re making the most of those resources that are in place. But in the end, it’s a matter of personal choice.” – *Editorial research by Jim Rose* ■



QUEENSTON HEIGHTS PHASE 1

Moriyama & Teshima Architects – together with Crossey Engineering Ltd. and Halsall Associates Ltd. – are proud to be working on all three phases of Queenston Heights Plaza Redevelopment in conjunction with the Niagara Falls Bridge Commission.

For more information, please visit our websites:
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INTERNATIONAL BORDER CROSSINGS

MRC is proud to have brought its extensive International Border Crossing expertise to the Niagara Falls Bridge Commission for the planning, design and construction of the expansion of the Lewiston-Queenston International Crossing.



Corporate Head Office
 2655 North Sheridan Way, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada L5K 2P8
 t: 905.823.8500 | f: 905.823.8503 | e: mrc@mrc.ca | www.mrc.ca
 Mississauga | Kitchener | Ottawa | Kingston | Halifax | Edinburgh | Brussels | Brisbane | Sydney | Auckland