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**HEADLINE:** Concerns about bridges escalate in Grosse Ile;  
Township, which has no say over either, seeks control of toll span

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**BODY:**

GROSSE ILE -- The township is grappling with how it will ensure access to and from the island as a free bridge rapidly deteriorates and officials fight over the toll bridge.

The township does not have any say over the two bridges -- the toll bridge is owned by Paul Smoke and the free bridge by Wayne County. If they were to close simultaneously, residents and business people would have no way on or off the island.

There is a chance of that happening, since both bridges need periodic upgrades.

"This is not a good situation to be in," said Carl Rashid, a township attorney hired to help officials take control of the toll bridge from Smoke.

Township officials believe they are better suited to maintain and operate the bridge. The officials hoped for help from the Wayne County Board of Commissioners because the board approves toll increases.

Smoke raised the toll a quarter to \$1.50 in July, but without the board's permission. Apparently the board did not know its members had that jurisdiction.

Meanwhile, the township is appealing the May 7 ruling by Wayne County Circuit Judge Susan H. Borman that bars it from taking the bridge using imminent domain laws.

It could take until the spring before the matter hits court again and the fall before there is a ruling.

The toll bridge was built by the Smoke family in 1912 and has been owned by them ever since. Paul Smoke assumed sole ownership five years ago.

He has approached Fifth Third Bank about obtaining a \$9 million loan. The bank wants the loan to essentially be a mortgage on the bridge.

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But since the township is trying to take the bridge, officials would have to sign off on Smoke pursuing the loan.

Rashid said that could leave the township responsible for paying off the loan if Grosse Ile obtains the bridge before Smoke pays off the loan. Island officials shot down that idea.

The county's bridge will need critical repairs in the next three years. But work has been scheduled.

"That still does not address the real problem," Rashid said. "This community of Grosse Ile has no control whatsoever over these two lifelines."

Smoke, who believes the township is wrong in its belief that Grosse Ile could better operate the bridge, said in June he plans to make significant renovations.

He said some of those renovations include a four-lane plaza at the base of the bridge off the island.

A public hearing held Dec. 7 in Grosse Ile let residents sound off about the bridge issues.

Alan Ackerman, Smoke's attorney, called the meeting insulting.

He said the township is wrong to pursue the bridge.

"I suspect they think he is going to give up," Ackerman said. "He is a tough guy. He is not going to give up. We are going to move forward and I think we will be treated fairly (by the courts) in the long run."

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