Line 5 tunnel unwise choice for state’s future

The following guest commentary was written by Jennifer McKay, policy director with Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council.

As you may have noticed, Enbridge has been conducting a full court press lately promoting their tunnel project for Line 5. From full-page advertisements in newspapers across the state and paid advertising on social media to op-eds and meetings with county commissions and encouraging resolutions in support of the tunnel, Enbridge is working hard to convince local government and the citizens of Michigan that the tunnel plan for the Straits of Mackinac is the best decision for the future of Michigan. According to Enbridge, it would mean “making a safe pipeline safer” and “continuing to safely meet Michigan’s energy needs.”

Why is Enbridge spending all this effort (and considerable amounts of money) to convince you the tunnel is a good idea? First, public opposition to Line 5 is significantly high. Previous polling shows 82 percent of Michigan citizens are concerned about Line 5 and the risk of spill. Michiganders continue to support shutting down Line 5 by a more than 4-to-1 margin, 58 percent support shutting Line 5 down while 12 percent support keeping it open. In addition, Enbridge is in the midst of a number of lawsuits regarding Line 5. Enbridge has sued the State of Michigan regarding the constitutionality of 2018 Public Act 359 and the creation of the Mackinac Straits Corridor Authority. The crux of the dispute is that the title of Act 359 — which was pushed through the Legislature in lame duck at the end of 2018 — violated provisions of the Michigan Constitution.

The second lawsuit was filed by Michigan's Attorney General against Enbridge. That lawsuit seeks a determination that the Line 5 pipelines in the Straits should be decommissioned due to the significant risk of a catastrophic spill from an anchor strike or operational failure.

Lastly, the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, in Wisconsin, sued Enbridge to force the decommissioning and removal of the Line 5 pipeline, which runs across 12 miles of sensitive habitat in the Bad River Reservation. Despite Enbridge's effort to convince Michigan citizens otherwise, replacement of Enbridge Energy's Line 5 in a tunnel under the Straits of Mackinac is not a wise decision for the future of Michigan's environment and economy.

Replacement of Line 5 in the Straits will not eliminate the risk to the public trust waters of the Great Lakes. A utility tunnel only addresses the risk posed by four miles of Line 5. Risk to Michigan's waters, public health and safety, and our economy remain for the other 543 miles of Line 5 located within Michigan. The pipeline over the other 543 miles of Line 5 has nearly 400 sites where it crosses a water body.

The inland portions can pose just as great, if not greater threat to our waters, due to the basic construction, operation, and maintenance of the line. The wall thickness of the inland pipeline is significantly less. It is 0.281 inches thick versus 0.918 inches at the Straits. Along with a thinner pipeline, it operates at a higher pressure. In addition, it has a side seam, which the Straits portion of pipe does not have. This seam can be subject to stress cracking and could cause the inland pipe to be more vulnerable. The inland portion is also not subject to the same inspection frequencies.

The U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) personnel and emergency managers both pointed to the stretch of Line 5 along U.S. Highway 2 near Lake Michigan's northern shore as their greatest concern. They cited as primary concerns: less robust technology such as pipeline wall thickness and monitoring equipment, higher vulnerability to an errant strike, potential access problems for containment and cleanup equipment and difficult terrain and environment for cleanup activities.

In addition, should the tunnel become a reality, Michigan is handcuffed to a century of continued use of fossil fuels. This will be disastrous for Michigan, both in terms of our natural resources and the economy. We only need to look at the recent extreme flooding and losses to agriculture from heavy spring rains to see the beginning costs of climate change. Changes in precipitation, coupled with rising extreme temperatures will reduce agricultural productivity in Michigan. Rising temperatures will worsen air quality, increase pollen and bring heavier rains and more threats from disease-carrying pests. We expect to see more pollution from runoff and more harmful algal blooms threatening the health of our waters. We must ask ourselves, is this the future we want Michigan locked into?

Alternatives have been identified by independent experts at London Economics International. These alternatives, including trucking and utilizing existing infrastructure, would address the risks associated with the entire pipeline infrastructure, address Michigan's energy needs, and could be implemented with little to no impact to Michigan's economy. Studies have demonstrated that the cost increases are low relative to typical propane, oil, and gasoline price volatility and would be minimal to industry and consumers.

So despite Enbridge's effort to convince the public that replacing Line 5 in the Straits is the best option, supporting the tunnel project is looking at Michigan's future with tunnel vision. It would allow Line 5 to continue crossing Michigan's rivers, streams, and Great Lakes for an untold number of years, putting these resources at risk and preventing the State from aggressively addressing climate change. This is why the tunnel project would not make "a safe pipeline safer" and "continue[ing] to safely meet Michigan's energy needs," but rather represents a real threat to our environment, our economy, and the health and wellbeing of the people of our State.