Enbridge/Whitmer talks keep tunnel on table
Environmentalists raise concerns after interview

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Enbridge opponents are wary after Gov. Gretchen Whitmer expressed a willingness to negotiate on a future Line 5 tunnel plan this week, despite previous steps her office took to stall the last administration's controversial Straits Tunnel Authority measures.

Whitmer's most recent comments on the matter come from a Detroit News article Wednesday. When asked about the proposed concrete tunnel that would span the Straits of Mackinac and house the petroleum pipeline, she told the newspaper's editorial board, "If it can help me get the pipeline out of the water earlier, that's something that is worth talking about."

The tunnel is touted to reduce the chance of an oil spill in the Straits.

Whitmer won backing from environmental groups during her campaign by calling for the unpopular Line 5 — a 65-year-old petroleum pipeline that passes underneath the Straits of Mackinac on its way from Superior, Wisconsin to Sarnia, Ontario — to be shut down.
And she continued to curry favor from those advocates in her first days in office when she challenged a set of measures signed by former Gov. Rick Snyder which created a Straits Tunnel Authority.

Those Snyder-administration policies moved through the government at a rapid pace during lame duck sessions last year, and essentially placed Enbridge on track to building the tunnel, thereby extending the pipeline's presence in the Great Lakes through the foreseeable future.

Last month, Attorney General Dana Nessel said the key piece of legislation which pushed those plans forward, Public Act 359, was approved on unconstitutional grounds, halting progress on the project. Still, Whitmer has not fully rejected the premise of a Straits tunnel, and comments suggest that she's working with Enbridge toward a compromise.

"The Governor is committed to a solution that protects the Great Lakes, removes the pipelines from the Straits as soon as possible and provides for the Upper Peninsula's energy needs," Tiffany Brown, spokesperson for Whitmer, told the News-Review. "Discussions with Enbridge and stakeholders are ongoing, and those discussions will help advise the Governor on the next steps moving forward."

It would take years to construct a tunnel for Line 5, and, during that time, the current, uncovered portion of the line would continue to operate. Legal battles between Enbridge, the state and other parties are likely to spring up under any number of scenarios, including a demand for a shutdown. Such litigation would also take years.

Jennifer McKay, policy director for Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council in Petoskey, said her organization's stance on a tunnel has not changed since last year. Snyder formally announced his deal with Enbridge to pursue a tunnel project in October.

"When former Gov. Snyder proposed a tunnel under the Straits of Mackinac to house Enbridge Energy's Line 5, Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council was opposed to the idea," she said. "We remain opposed to the idea as Gov. Whitmer announces that a revised tunnel deal is an option moving forward."

The Watershed Council has consistently cited the fact that — regardless of the efficacy of the Straits tunnel — the aging tunnel is still prone to rupture at other points along its 543-mile path through Michigan. Along that route, the pipeline crosses hundreds of water bodies that feed into the Great Lakes. And the inland portions of the pipeline also have a thinner barrier and have a side seam: two factors that make it more likely to burst.

The tunnel plan was deemed plausible among a handful of Straits-area solutions outlined by the Snyder administration — all of which were predicated on the continued operation of the tunnel. But McKay noted that some tests still need to be done to determine the full feasibility of the plan, that there are other options available that would account for the entire infrastructure of the pipeline and that the Michigan Pipeline Safety Advisory Board did not cite the tunnel plan as a preferred alternative.

"We applaud the Governor and Enbridge for continuing discussions," McKay said. "However, the conversation should revolve around decommissioning of Line 5 within a designated timeframe and how to initiate the alternative options to ensure Michigan protects public health and safety and the state's economy and natural resources."

The Watershed Council is just one of several organizations throughout the state that has urged the governor against the tunnel option following the Detroit News article.

"Allowing oil to flow through the heart of our Great Lakes in any form is dangerous and unacceptable. The people of Michigan should not have to bear the massive risks just for a convenient pass-through for Canadian oil," Lisa Wozniak, executive director at Michigan League of Conservation Voters, said in a statement. "We urge the governor to pursue alternative options to the tunnel as she has conversations with the oil company responsible for spilling over 1 million gallons of oil since 1968."

When the News-Review reached out to Enbridge spokesman Ryan Duffy on Wednesday, he provided the same written response on the issue that he provided in the Detroit News article:

"We continue to provide information to the Governor's office and to seek clarification from the administration on a path forward for the tunnel project," he said.

"We believe the project is the best way to protect the waters of the Great Lakes while ensuring families, manufacturers and other businesses safely receive the energy transported through Line 5."

When pressed for further details about the company's work with the administration, Duffy told the News-Review, "all I can share for now is what is in the statement."

In addition to transporting petroleum, Enbridge's Line 5 infrastructure carries natural gas to the Upper Peninsula, and Line 5 proponents have touted that fact as an argument for keeping the pipeline running. One study from London Economics International suggests those propane needs could be met by rail and truck.

Enbridge also says the tunnel project will bring jobs to Northern Michigan.

"It will create a major, half-a-billion dollar infrastructure project in Northern Michigan, providing good-paying jobs for members of the skilled trades and other workers," Duffy told the News-Review. "It would be one of the largest infrastructure projects in Northern Michigan in decades."