

MATTY MOROUN'S BRIDGE TO NOWHERE

There was a lot of chatter last night about how unsuccessful millionaires and billionaires have been at buying political seats for themselves, with Linda McMahon now having spent \$100M to lose two elections in Connecticut. The exception—Mike Bloomberg in NYC—in a sense proves the rule, since he did it as an Independent.

But there's another example of that rule which might be just as interesting going forward.

In MI, we had 6 statewide referenda this year: 3 pertaining to labor, 1 on renewable energy, 1 on taxes, and 1 effort by a local businessman, Matty Moroun, to cement his business monopoly in the state constitution.

Moroun owns the Ambassador Bridge, currently the only bridge from Detroit to Canada (there is a tunnel—which can't carry commercial traffic—out of Detroit and another bridge crossing about 30 miles Northeast that is convenient from areas north of Detroit, like Southfield). Moroun's bridge, which is the busiest trade border crossing in North America, is a big bottleneck (it's not unusual for even cars to wait 45 minutes, and trucks often have longer waits). And it makes him rich.

Governor Snyder worked with Canada to craft another bridge plan that was publicly funded—largely by Canada. Seeing his cash cow threatened, Moroun used the referendum process to try to protect his monopoly. He paid signature gatherers and then spent \$33 million on ads to pass an initiative that would require a referendum before building any publicly supported international bridge.

This proposal would:

- *Require the approval of a majority of voters at*

a statewide election and in each municipality where “new international bridges or tunnels for motor vehicles” are to be located before the State of Michigan may expend state funds or resources for acquiring land, designing, soliciting bids for, constructing, financing, or promoting new international bridges or tunnels.

- Create a definition of “new international bridges or tunnels for motor vehicles” that means, “any bridge or tunnel which is not open to the public and serving traffic as of January 1, 2012.”

Moroun’s TV ads have been on for 6 months, and utterly dominated the campaign season (indeed, utterly dominated TV advertising generally). The bridge ads have been a running joke here in MI, though earlier polls showed it fairly close.

It failed, however, along with every other initiative (the closest one was the referendum affirming Snyder’s new Emergency Manager law). Voters rejected it by a 60-40 margin.

There will be a lot of discussion about the super-rich trying to buy our political process.

It has very rarely worked for individuals—not for Linda McMahon, not for Meg Whitman, not for Dick DeVos (though of course the Kochs have been better at buying politics, if not seats). But it's not just political seats these very rich are trying to buy: Matt Moroun also treated out democratic process like his own personal investment game.

Thus far that effort failed. Let's hope it stays that way.