

Hopefuls differ on bridge project

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All four candidates seeking to represent northeastern North Carolina in the General Assembly support the Mid-Currituck Bridge but disagree on the best way to protect the proposed \$600 million project from being chopped out of the state budget.

Republicans Bob Steinburg and Bill Cook say their party connections may keep the GOP, which controls both houses of the Legislature, from cutting state “gap funds” needed for the project.

For the past two years, members of the Republican controlled-Senate have attempted to cut or eliminate funding for the bridge, but the effort has failed to gain House support. Steinburg, who is seeking the 1st House District seat, and Cook, who is seeking the 1st Senate District seat, said they would make Republicans more comfortable with the project.

But Democrats Bill Luton and Stan White said they doubt the two Republicans would break ranks with their party to fight for the bridge.

Even if they did, White, who is seeking re-election in the 1st Senate District, questioned if Cook would have much pull within his own party. White said Cook didn’t have much influence with fellow Republicans during the two years he served in the House as the District 6 representative.

Cook said he favors the bridge and plans to lobby for it along with Currituck commissioners at a meeting Friday in Raleigh before the General Assembly’s transportation oversight committee. In recent months, the committee has demanded closer scrutiny of financing for the proposed \$600 million toll bridge. Committee Chairman Bill Rabon has balked at the state’s plan to pay \$28 million each year for 30 years to offset construction costs in the public-private project.

Cook said he’s not too concerned about the questions Rabon is raising.

“I think it’s not as bad as it appears,” he said.

Cook said the project’s holdup can be blamed on Gov. Bev Perdue’s administration for failing to work with lawmakers.

Cook said his election to the District 1 Senate seat could give the bridge more leverage in the Republican-controlled Senate. He said White has not been able to help the bridge because he lacks any power.

“When folks get up to Raleigh, it turns out to be a team sport and (White’s) not on the right team,” said Cook. “I am sure I can get a lot more done that he could not think about getting done.”

White dismissed as “political talk” Cook’s assertion that his being a Republican senator would help the bridge.

White, who's filled the Senate seat since 2011, said Cook's voting record in the state House does not show him breaking ranks with the party on any issue.

White also doubted if Cook had enough political clout within his own party to make a difference. Even as a member of the redistricting committee, Cook was not able to have his own district redrawn in his favor, White noted. The new District 6 favors Democrats, he said.

White said opponents to the bridge "do not understand the economic impact it would have on the area." The bridge would open up new job opportunities for local residents who could not afford the hour-and-a-half hour drive to work to the Currituck Outer Banks before. The beaches often resort to hiring employees from Europe because they cannot find workers to make the drive, he said.

Luton said negotiations with both Republicans and Democrats is the best way to make sure the bridge remains funded. He said working with members of both parties will be key to keeping the project alive.

Luton, who is seeking to replace fellow Democrat Bill Owens for the 1st House District seat, said he doesn't think Steinburg's being a Republican would help get the bridge built. In anything, he sees Steinburg's party loyalty working against the bridge if Republicans don't back it.

"I can't see him breaking ranks to stop it," Luton said.

Luton said part of his job will be seeing that the bridge's funding remains intact. Recent scrutiny by the oversight committee appears to be politically motivated, he said.

"Extra scrutiny can be a good thing when its designed to make sure we are doing everything on the up-and-up, but when it's being done to kill a project or divert money to other parts of the state, it's not the best way to go about it," said Luton.

Steinburg said he plans to join Currituck's all-Republican Board of Commissioners in Raleigh next month in support of the bridge.

"I am and have been committed to the bridge, and if elected I am going to continue to work in that regard to see that the bridge is going to be built," Steinburg said.

Steinburg said he's also discussed the issue with House Speaker Thom Tillis, who continues to support the project.

"It's a fairly safe ride through the House," said Steinburg.

Getting support in the Senate is more troublesome, he acknowledged. That's one reason a Republican in the 1st District Senate seat, like Cook, could help, Steinburg said.

He said some Republicans have opposed the bridge because it was championed by Marc Basnight, the former Democratic senator from Dare County. Basnight's treatment of Republicans during his reign as Senate president has made some senators reluctant to embrace the project, he said.

“They are not inclined to do anything for Basnight” or White, who some view as Basnight’s protege, Steinburg said. White was appointed by the Democratic Party to fill Basnight’s unexpired term after Basnight resigned in January 2011.