

Viewpoints

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TRANSPORTATION

New ferry services could cut into Peace Bridge business

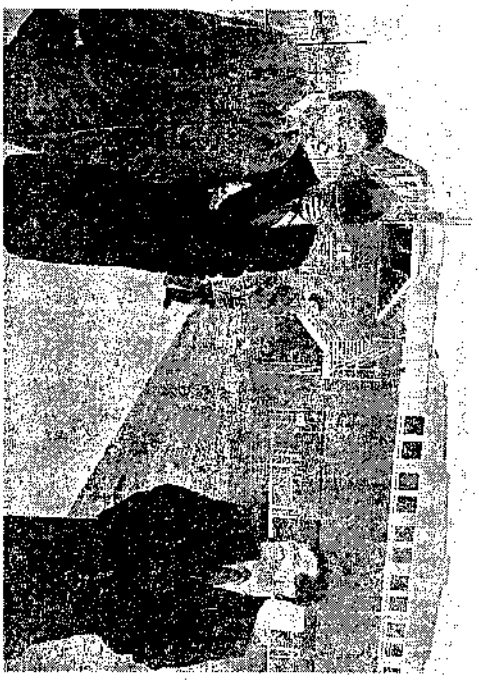
By KEITH FOREST
Special to The News

The Buffalo Niagara region may soon have to share the lucrative flow of traffic across the Peace Bridge to Canada. For years, this region has enjoyed a virtual monopoly on commerce flowing between the two nations. After all, the next closest crossing point is Detroit. But soon residents on both sides of the border will have a new way to cross the Great Lakes.

Officials in Rochester and Erie, Pa., are both developing ferry service to Canada. As Buffalo debates how to expand the Peace Bridge, those two cities are hoping to siphon off some of the 8 million passenger and commercial vehicles that cross the bridge each year.

Rochester's high-speed ferry service across Lake Ontario to Toronto is expected to launch next spring. Officials there have managed to get New York State to pour \$14 million into the project.

Erie officials don't have a launch date yet for their service across Lake Erie to



Associated Press

Assembly speaker Sheldon Silver, left, and Rochester Mayor William Johnson talk as they leave a news conference at the warehouse that will become the terminal for Rochester's ferry.

Port Dover, Ont. But the Erie-Western Pennsylvania Port Authority has built a port and customs office for the ferry with \$4 million in funds from the Pennsylvania state government.

The two new ferry systems are expected to carry hundreds of thousands of passengers annually. Those are travelers that ordinarily would be funneled over the Peace Bridge. The ferry goes won't be spending any money in Buffalo.

Erie's ferry service may have an added attraction for tourists — gambling. Erie-Western Pennsylvania Port Authority officials are exploring the possibility of placing slot machines on the boats. If that happens, Erie will have more than a competing way to cross the border; it also will have riverboat gambling.

Erie's plans also include a separate low-speed ferry service for tractor trailers. That could take lucrative commercial traffic from the Peace Bridge.

The Rochester ferry is expected to have restaurants, duty free shopping, a kids' play area, and satellite television. That will give

passengers plenty to do during their two-and-a-half hour trip to Toronto.

Each ferry will carry 200 vehicles across Lake Ontario, short-circuiting the major advantage of the Peace Bridge. Ferry goes can take their cars with them to Canada. The ferry service is expected to pump \$46 million into the Rochester economy each year.

The major advantage for Buffalo in this battle for traffic across the Great Lakes is that it will be much cheaper to use the Peace Bridge than the ferry to go to Canada. The bridge charges \$2.50 to cross. The ferry is expected to cost \$40 for each car, plus an additional \$10 per passenger. While the ferry will make only two to three round trips each day, visitors can cross the Peace Bridge at their convenience.

Both Rochester and Erie will be heavily promoting their ferries and their cities. Officials in both cities see the ferry service as something that could catapult