

IN PORTSMOUTH: THE TOLLS BEGIN, A CROWD ASSEMBLES, A BRIDGE (LITERALLY) SMOLDERS

➤ "Is John Galt here? John Galt, you here? You started this."

It's Sunday evening just off the bike path at the Portsmouth end of the Sakonnet River Bridge, and toll protest organizer John Vitkevich is making one last attempt to draw the anonymous instigator up to the microphone.

The shadowy "Galt" had sent anti-toll letters to state leaders promising "thousands of like-minded citizens" would show up, demand the keys to the toll administration building, and "occupy the toll system." But no Galt appears.

Still, to be fair, it is a pretty good crowd for 5 pm on a Sunday, with more than 250 protesters — elementary school kids with their parents, folks pushing baby carriages, a strong showing of seniors — all opposing the 10-cent toll scheduled to take effect tomorrow. Many carry signs, ranging from a simple "Islanders held hostage" written in magic marker, to yellow Gadsden Flags with hissing Tea Party rattlers, to a 15-foot vinyl banner reading "Refuse to use EZ Pass. www.donttoll.com."

The target of all this ire doesn't look like an inspiration for a radical uprising. Next to the path where the protesters gather sits a squat cement-block building and a spidery tubular steel frame that spans the road, sprouting cameras and sensors.

"When Darlington put this up at the end of May," Vitkevich says, referring to Rhode Island Turnpike and Bridge Authority chair David Darlington, "he put it up to quiet the opposition. He figured we'd all shut up and lay down and pay his [toll]. It didn't happen." The solution Vitkevich offers is simple: "DOT, take the bridge back. RITBA, take your stuff down and go play with the Newport Bridge and the Mount Hope Bridge."

Darlington is a prime target of the dozen or so speakers at the 45-minute event, which is often interrupted by cars whizzing by on Route 24 honking in solidarity. There is a strong undercurrent of anti-tax and anti-government rage in many of the speeches, inspired, some say, by an eleventh-hour betrayal at the State House.

The old bridge, which had been free of charge to cross during its 55-year life, had fallen into disrepair (and fallen occasionally, in small chunks, into the Sakonnet River). When the RI Dept. of Transportation began planning its replacement in 2002, Vitkevich says, tolls were eliminated from consideration. Fast forward to 2012. With the new bridge nearing completion, the General Assembly transferred it from the control of RIDOT to RITBA, which needed a revenue stream (read: tolls) to support its maintenance.

In the 2014 budget, which passed with a slim House majority on June 26, tolls were deferred until next February and a commission was put in place to study funding options. But then on July 2, thanks to an amendment introduced the night before recess, the toll decision was reversed on the grounds that, according to federal law, tolls needed to be implemented before the bridge was declared complete. Hence the ten-cent placeholder. After a vicious debate the evening of July 2, the bill passed both House and Senate in the dead of night.

"We live in a broken state with a broken government," says Howard Benesch of Tiverton, standing near the bridge on Sunday afternoon. Another Tiverton resident, Jeff Belli, adds, "We need to take back the state of Rhode Island."

Reached by phone on Monday, RITBA's David Darlington categorically denied some of the darker rumors circulating at the protest: that the new bridge had already sustained millions of stress cracks and RITBA was in discussions to implement a weight limit.

Neither allegation is correct, Darlington said. "The bridge is safe. It is dangerous for people to be spreading false information."

Reaching the RITBA by phone, yourself, may be tough this week. In addition to encouraging toll resistance measures like wrapping E-ZPass transponders in tinfoil when crossing the bridge or paying the 10 cents by check, Vitkevich asks protesters on Sunday to phonebomb the RITBA.

"Contact them on Tuesday, contact them on Wednesday, get their number and put it in your speed dial," he says. "Harass them. They need to be harassed."

But while Vitkevich advocates "financial disobedience in a civil way," he takes care to distance himself from what took place near the toll building in the early morning hours on Saturday, when an electrical utility tunnel feeding the toll system was damaged in a fire RITBA characterized as "vandalism and arson." The State Police searched Vitkevich's house on Saturday after the fire.

"Anything I can do to cost the RITBA legally and ethically, I will do. But I'm not running around with gasoline and matches," he says.

As for John Galt, the five cars' worth of troopers at the event would surely like to have a chat with him. But he never steps to the mic. And long after the hour-long protest wrapped up, this reporter drove over the bridge right as tolling kicked in 12:01 am, imagining the faint electronic tickle of radio frequency sensors and looking for any sign of resistance.

John Galt was still a no-show

—John McDaid

