Michigan Sen. Curt VanderWall calls it the “most scrutinized pipeline in the nation.” And whatever one thinks the state should do about the future of Line 5 — which is located under the Straits of Mackinac and carries up to 540,000 barrels of oil and natural gas liquids every day — it’s hard to disagree with the observation. Built in 1953, the twin pipelines have been called a “sunken hazard” that put the “Great Lakes at risk of a catastrophic oil pipeline rupture.”

But VanderWall and others note that Michigan relies on the energy supplies being shipped via Line 5. He says, for example, that most of the propane used in the Upper Peninsula comes from the 645-mile pipeline, which starts in Wisconsin, goes under the Straits, and then winds through Michigan before reaching Ontario.

“To get the same supplies by truck, you’d need 2,400 trucks doing it every day, nonstop,” says VanderWall, a member of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Legislative Caucus Executive Committee. “The pipeline is the safest way to transport the oil. We need to make it safer.”

The state’s policy solution, at least for now, is this: Allow Line 5 to continue to operate for another few years, under enhanced inspections. Meanwhile, begin construction on a utility tunnel, located up to 100 feet beneath the lakebed, that would secure a new pipeline.

Michigan’s SB 1197, signed into law in late 2018, establishes a Mackinac Straits Corridor Authority to oversee this project as well as subsequent operations. The Canadian company Enbridge, which owns Line 5, is responsible for the costs, estimated to be $500 million. It estimates a project completion date of 2024.

Some Michigan residents and groups, though, have not given up on the idea of ridding the Great Lakes of this oil pipeline (old or new) altogether, and they now have two powerful allies on their side: the state’s new governor, Gretchen Whitmer, and attorney general, Dana Nessel. One of Whitmer’s first moves as governor was to request a legal opinion from Nessel on the constitutionality of SB 1197.

Along with Line 5’s age and location in an ecologically sensitive area (the Straits connect lakes Michigan and Huron), other factors have led to heavy public scrutiny — reports that Line 5 has spilled at least 1.1 million gallons of oil since 1968, concerns about Enbridge’s lack of “forthrightness” regarding structural issues, and a break in another Enbridge pipeline nine years ago that spilled more than 1 million gallons of oil into Michigan’s Talmadge Creek and Kalamazoo River.

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