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(updated April 17,
2000).

Gov. Engler leads efforts to construct new Soo lock

Long-delayed federal project would benefit U.S. economic interests

By George Weeks / The Detroit News

SAULT STE. MARIE -- Gov. John Engler wants to spend \$5 million to lead a multi-state effort for a new Soo lock to handle the massive freighters that help keep the nation's economy pumping.

In his budget proposal to be delivered to state lawmakers Thursday, the governor will ask them to help him make good on a 1998 campaign pledge to join seven other states to help finance the long-delayed federal project.

"It won't get built on my watch," Engler said of the proposed \$225 million shipping lock at Sault Ste. Marie, that would connect Lakes Huron and Superior.

"But we have paved the way for it. We worked with Congress last year to get that all teed up and ready to go."

Under term limits, Engler must leave office at the end of 2002.

First authorized by Congress in 1986 to replace two old and outmoded small locks, the new lock would provide "enormous benefits to not only Michigan and the Great Lakes region, but also the nation in terms of our vital economic and strategic interests," Engler said.

The governor hopes construction can begin in October with an uncertain completion date.

"With 1,000-foot freighters now comprising half of the U.S. Great Lakes fleet, it is critical that the construction of this new lock move forward expeditiously to ensure that our utilities and manufacturing facilities have the raw materials they need to sustain our strong position in the global economy."

Only the Poe Lock can accommodate long freighters on the St. Marys River. Poe, opened in 1969, handles about 75 percent of the Soo tonnage. The MacArthur Lock, opened in 1943, handles the remainder.

The original locks were considered among engineering marvels of their day.

Of the projected \$225 million cost for the new lock, Great Lakes states are required to contribute about \$54 million. Michigan's share would be about \$14 million over 50 years. Engler's \$5 million proposal is to capitalize a Soo Locks Fund whose principal and interest earnings would then be used to cover the long-term obligation.

Engler aides said no other Great Lakes state has yet provided any money.

Another Great Lakes project to be highlighted in Engler's budget,

expected to call for about a half-percent increase over this year's \$9.74 billion general fund budget:

-- \$200,000 for the first in a five-year commitment to the Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary and Underwater Preserve off Alpena. Focusing on shipwrecks, it is part of Engler's emphasis on historical preservation.

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