

The Herald-Palladium

ONLINE

Online archives from the Herald-Palladium. Starting May, 1999

December 07, 2001

Study calls for publicly owned docks

By SCOTT AIKEN / H-P Staff Writer

ST. JOSEPH - A new study recommends public acquisition of two dock sites and other property on the St. Joseph River Harbor to ensure a future for commercial shipping.

The harbor, a hub of commercial activity since the mid 1800s, has the potential to receive nearly double the current level of commodity tonnage, according to the study by Mariport Group Ltd., a Cambridge, Ontario, consulting firm.

To reach that level, the study recommends as a first step purchasing the McCoy Docking Co. and Consumers Asphalt Co. properties, and the St. Joseph Riverwatch Inn, to form the nucleus of a public port.

Both properties are owned by family trusts and are leased to companies that operate the docks. Public purchase would keep the land from being lost to commercial use, securing places for ships to dock and unload.

Christopher Wright of Mariport, reporting the study findings to the Berrien County Board Thursday, said the land would cost an estimated \$2.5 million to \$3 million.

The close proximity of the harbor saves an estimated at \$5 million to \$6 million a year in shipping costs for area businesses, compared to regional costs, the study said, and the economic benefits of the port are likely much higher.

Also, because ships use the harbor, the federal government pays maintenance costs, including \$1.3 million a year from the Army Corps of Engineers for dredging.

But communities tend to view ports as not the best use for waterfront property, Wright said, although he believes commercial and recreational activities are compatible.

"The trouble is, nobody sees the economic impact until the port is gone,"

said Wright.

A port's economic value is often unseen because it is widely dispersed. Communities, meanwhile, may view homes and pleasure boat slips as a better use for waterfront property

The report was paid for by the county board, Michigan Department of Transportation and Southwestern Michigan Commission. It is to be evaluated by the St. Joseph River Harbor Authority, which will make recommendations to the county board.

Harbor authority Chairman R.J. Burkholz said the study illustrates the harbor's importance.

"So we are a viable commercial harbor and we want to remain that way," he said.

One of the study's main purposes was to identify companies within 50 miles of St. Joseph that might be interested in using the port or products that could be shipped through it.

The study identified 550 companies in 15 categories ranging from concrete products to sand and gravel, grain dealers and scrap metal.

Over the years commercial docks have been disappearing, the land converted to other uses. The number fell from nine docks in 1978 to seven in 1986. Now there are three, the Consumers Asphalt dock in Benton Harbor, and the McCoy and LaFarge Corp. docks in St. Joseph.

However, shipping tonnage was steady in the 1990s after fluctuating during the 1980s, and appears to be increasing. A record 770,189 tons was received at the three docks in 2000.

Consumers led with 306,364 tons of stone and sand - more than the entire harbor received in 1983. McCoy in 2000 received 251,481 tons of stone, sand and salt, and Lafarge took in 212,000 tons of cement.

The port could be expanded to handle up to 1.2 million tons of commodities, the study said.

Currently, 80 percent of all cargo was delivered within a 50-mile radius, 23 percent of it used in Berrien County.

The McCoy and Consumers docks, in use for more than 60 years, are in relatively poor condition and need upgrades or make them safer for ship mooring and capacity, the study said.

If the docks are sold to a private buyer and converted to uses other than docking, the study found, the Army Corps is unlikely to continue paying for channel dredging and related work.

The Mariport study identified several opportunities to expand the port.

Southwest Michigan uses about 120,000 tons of salt on roads each winter, but the harbor handles only about 35,000 tons. Keeping the harbor dredged to the proper depth of 21 feet could allow the harbor to handle more salt, the study said.

The harbor can accommodate ships up to 650 feet long. The U.S. fleet has 22 such vessels operating on the Great Lakes, and the Canadian fleet has 10.

Re-establishing the 21-foot depth could allow ships to bring in heavier loads and drive down shipping costs, and lead to increased shipments of stone, sand and cement.

Other possibilities to build harbor business are a lumber reload facility to handle shipments from northern Ontario, a high-speed ferry to carry passengers between St. Joseph and Chicago, cruise ship calls and a small asphalt terminal.

Recommendations include purchase of the McCoy and Consumer docks and nearby land for expansion and business activities that need access to water but do not need to be next to it.

Both terminals should be upgraded with sheet pile faces, and equipment to safely moor ships. A full-time harbor manager should be hired, the study suggests.

Larry Karnes, freight policy specialist for the Michigan Department of Transportation, said few ports in Michigan have publicly-owned facilities, contrary to other states and countries.

Michigan has 40 commercial harbors with about 150 commercial terminals.

Karnes, who attended Thursday's board meeting, said the state's harbors developed without public ownership, in most cases, because there was no need. Today, public involvement may be more necessary to sort out land use conflicts and other issues, he said.

Search for

Word one

and or not

Word two

and or not

Word three

Maximum stories:

[[Home](#)] [[Local News](#)] [[Sports](#)] [[Focus](#)] [[Entertainment](#)] [[Obituaries](#)] [[Columnists](#)]
 [[Business](#)] [[Homes](#)] [[Our Town](#)] [[Editorial](#)] [[Business Directory](#)] [[About Us](#)]

