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## Rivet wants state to pay dredging cost

Saginaw River project can't go forward without place to dump spoils

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By Jeff Kart  
Times Writer

The Michigan Department of Transportation maintains highways, why not waterways?

That's the thinking of a local legislator, who's proposed a bill to clear a major roadblock to dredging the upper Saginaw River shipping channel - the cost of acquiring a site for the spoils.

The bill, from state Rep. Joseph L. Rivet, D-Bangor Township, would make the Michigan Department of Transportation responsible for the costs, instead of Bay or Saginaw county.

"It's called the Michigan Department of Transportation, not the Michigan Highway Department," Rivet quipped.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has attempted a dredging project on the upper river, a 13-mile area stretching from Bay City to Saginaw, three times in more than 20 years.

The first two efforts failed because a spoils site couldn't be secured.

The agency hasn't had much luck with its latest attempt,

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either. Officials approached Bay and Saginaw counties last year, saying the Corps would dig out the river, but needed a "local sponsor" to acquire a 400-acre spoils site for 20 years worth of dredgings and pay other costs for construction and maintenance.

Bay County commissioners said they couldn't afford all of that. A landfill at the General Motors foundry in Saginaw County's Buena Vista Township is now under consideration by Saginaw County officials, said Army Corps spokesman Terry A. Long.

Rivet said he thinks creating a spoils site would cost under \$1 million - a drop in the bucket for MDOT, but a major hit for a county budget.

"There is tens of millions of dollars in commerce going up that river," Rivet said. "The fact that that port benefits a wide area ... to say it's one county's responsibility I think is not really appropriate."

He said the shipping industry on the river provides affordable materials for roads all over Michigan, along with hundreds of jobs.

MDOT does not agree.

Spokesman Ari Adler wasn't aware of the legislation, but said he thinks it's quite a stretch.

"As it stands right now we're more confused by it than anything else," Adler said.

"We don't think we're the right department to be handling this, because we don't deal with waterways," he added. "The only involvement we have with waterways is if we build a bridge over it or we send a ferry across it."

Adler said the Department of Natural Resources or Department of Environmental Quality are more appropriate sponsors.

William G. Webber, with an alliance of 18 businesses formed to push the dredging project, said the state should pay something. Water from 23 counties drains into the river, Webber said, and businesses on the upper river ship materials to more than 20 counties statewide.

"It affects so many other counties that it kind of becomes a state issue," said Webber, vice president of Sargent Docks & Terminal Co. in Saginaw.

Rivet wants state to pay dredging cost

He says shipping will end on the river in about four years unless it's dug out.

The Army Corps says about 3.1 million cubic yards of dredgings need to be removed - making the upper river a couple feet deeper, by Webber's estimate. The area is already about three feet too shallow due to low water levels, he said.

That means ships have to haul lighter loads more often, driving up costs, Webber said.

Rivet said he doesn't expect his bill to succeed if MDOT opposes it. He hopes it will at least raise the issue enough for some state agency to kick in total or partial funding.

"The key is to begin to focus attention on all levels at this issue so we can get this thing dredged in the next couple of years," Rivet said.

- Jeff Kart covers Bay County government for The Times. He can be reached at 894-9639.

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