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Giant ships on seaway a high-stakes debate

Shipping: Economy, environment at odds

Would it be a good idea to introduce super-sized cargo ships to the St. Lawrence Seaway? The concept is only on the radar screen now, but the potential implications of going ahead are enormous and the debate is already off and running.

Proponents of the idea believe that giant ocean-going vessels would revitalize the struggling seaway system and create more business for ports like Hamilton. Environmentalists and some concerned citizens, however, are sounding the alarm about the potential risks such as lower water levels in the Great Lakes and an accelerated invasion of destructive alien species.

The issue is gaining steam with a proposal by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to study expansion of the seaway to accommodate huge container ships that now carry much of the world's cargo. There are growing signs that the U.S. and Canadian governments are willing to split the estimated \$20-million cost of the study. The seaway itself is in favour of a study. It would examine issues such as stretching the locks on the Welland Canal and the St. Lawrence River, and deepening the connecting rivers and channels to accommodate ships as large as those that travel through the Panama Canal.

There are strong arguments on either side of the issue. The redevelopment of the seaway would enable massive container ships that currently make it only as far as Montreal to serve ports throughout the Great Lakes. Overseas cargo is a valuable source of revenue for a port like Hamilton. While smaller in terms of tonnage than the shipments of iron ore and coal carried by lake freighters, overseas cargo produces more revenue because it involves manufactured goods and bulk commodities. The shipping industry is worried that the seaway will become increasingly irrelevant and uncompetitive if it doesn't have the



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One question looming large is where the money would be found to undertake a project with a preliminary estimated cost of \$10 billion US. Most of the seaway locks are Canadian-owned. Some of the new ships are more than 300 metres long, at least 80 metres longer than the Welland Canal locks, to say nothing of the additional draft and width required.

The potential environmental implications could be equally challenging. Environmentalists are worried that the massive ships would invariably increase the risk of more exotic species infiltrating the fragile Great Lakes from the dumping of ballast water. They are concerned that dredging rivers and channels would generate huge quantities of contaminated sediment, create new disposal problems, and raise the spectre of health risks for people and wildlife. Fish habitat could be jeopardized. Changing the "plumbing" of the seaway could adversely impact lake levels if it were to result in water flowing more rapidly out of the system.

If the study proceeds, as seems likely, the ramifications pro and con will be clearer than they are now. In any event, caution is in order by both governments. There is too much at stake to proceed on any other basis.

-- Gord McNulty

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