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Top News

Wider, deeper Seaway proposed

River residents, opponents say study is narrow, bigger ships could ruin waterway.

December 08, 2002

By Mark Libbon
Washington bureau

Washington, D.C. -The Great Lakes could be even greater, they say in the Midwest, if only the largest ocean-going vessels could carry cargo between the Atlantic Ocean and fresh-water ports like Duluth, Minn.

That can't happen unless the United States and Canada spend at least \$10 billion on a big dig through the St. Lawrence Seaway, the narrow outlet that connects the five Great Lakes with the ocean. Widening and deepening the channel would enable more ships, and bigger ships, to use the Seaway.

The Army Corps of Engineers

is on the case, having waded into what could be a six-year study of potential changes to the 2,300-mile Great Lakes Navigation System.

Many New Yorkers fear the Army Corps will use the study to find reasons to widen the seven locks between Montreal and Cape Vincent, deepen the channel through the St. Lawrence River to 35 feet and open the river to shipping during winter months.

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"I love the river," said Karen Howard of Manlius, 54, whose family still visits the Wellesley Island cottage where she spent her childhood summers. "To send those supertankers through the heart of the Thousand Islands - it's just unthinkable."

The advocacy group Save the River and New York's governor and senators oppose the Army Corps study because of the impact a wider and deeper sea lane could have on the area. Rep. John McHugh, whose North Country district includes riverside communities and their small businesses, said he hopes to strip money for the study out of the federal budget.

"It was not an easy decision to turn my back on the construction jobs and the importance of the modernization of the Seaway and the relevance it has to the North Country," McHugh said. "That's generally the kind of initiative I'd be inclined to support. But when you look at the unavoidable environmental consequences such a project would have, the greater good becomes very clear." /SUMidwest pushes expansion

Opponents in New York may be outmatched, however, by the political heft of Midwest states whose ports are eager to welcome the 1,000-foot ships that are now common to the Panama Canal and other trade routes.

The anti-study sentiment isn't even universal among New Yorkers.

"It befounds me that so many people are going after a study," said Tom McAuslan, executive director of the Port of Oswego Authority, coining a verb that merges the meanings of "befuddle" and "confound."

McAuslan said any work on the St. Lawrence would be designed to mitigate damage to the river's ecology. "That's a given, has to be part of it," he said.

At the same time, Oswego and other port cities see a modern navigation system as a potential boost to local economies. The current Seaway, with locks that limit the length of ocean-going "salties" to 750 feet, can handle only 13 percent of the world's vessel capacity.

"We're concerned about people working and industry and tens of thousands of people who depend on the Seaway," McAuslan said.

Opponents fear the economic argument is driving the study and react with suspicion toward the Army Corps and its sponsors.

"They look at our river as their discharge pipe," said Jack Manno, director of the Great Lakes Consortium, a research alliance of 16 colleges and universities based at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry in Syracuse.

"We're at the bottom of the system and New York's interests aren't taken into account at all," Manno said. An outdated system

Wayne Schloop, project manager for the study at the Army Corps' office in Detroit, denies claims by river advocates that the study is being rigged to favor one outcome.

A report on the first phase of the study is still awaiting approval in Washington, he said, and its recommendations have not been made



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public.

Schloop indicated that the next stage would most likely focus on the reliability of the aging locks on the St. Lawrence Seaway and the Welland Canal that links Lake Ontario and Lake Erie.

"If you come to a decision point that the locks won't last more than 20 years, at that point you're going to have to do some kind of analysis," he said. "Does it make sense to rebuild them at their present size and present dimensions?"

The Seaway opened in 1959 with the completion of a deep draft channel and new locks in the St. Lawrence River. The link between the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Ocean provided an economical route for the Midwest to export iron ore, grain and other products.

Overseas trade today makes up about 5 percent of the traffic in the Great Lakes system. Most of the tonnage shipped on the lakes travels between U.S. ports or between the United States and Canada.

The American Great Lakes Ports Association argues that the Seaway has "turned into an aged and outdated system" because it cannot accommodate the 1,000-foot vessels that are becoming common in ocean-going ships.

To handle the larger ships, the Seaway's locks, now measuring 80 feet by 766 feet, could be enlarged to 110 feet by 1,200 feet, and the channel could be dredged from its current depth of 26.25 feet to 35 feet. 'Heartache and disaster'

Sidney Manes, an early practitioner of environmental law in Syracuse, has been spending summers on the St. Lawrence long enough to remember when the Seaway was proposed in the 1950s.

"The only thing it has brought us is heartache and almost economic disaster," said Manes, 76, a member and legal counsel of the Chippewa Bay Yacht Club. He worries about future disasters like the "Slick of 1976," when a tanker barge hit a shoal near Wellesley Island in a heavy fog and spilled 177,815 gallons of oil.

"It's just a catastrophe to bring these foreign vessels in who dump their bilge and have no respect for the environment," he said.

Eric Mower, owner of the Syracuse-based public relations firm that bears his name, enjoys watching the big ships slide past Wellesley Island, literally a stone's throw from the property he bought on the channel side of the island.

But Mower believes dredging, bigger locks and year-round shipping will only hurt New York by harming the environment and the river-based businesses that rely on tourism and recreation.

The ships are deceptive, he said, in the way they affect the river.

"They make very little impact on the surface of the water, but when the ships go through there is a very powerful underwater surge that is not visible unless you look beneath the surface," he said.

"These ships are a mixed blessing," said Dr. Harold Small of

Fayetteville, who has a summer camp on Wellesley Island. "Industry wants these big boats to come in, but they're destructive to the habitat."

Karen Howard, the Manlius woman whose family still summers on Wellesley Island, said dredging the river would "rile up all the metals and nasty things that have been filtering through the Great Lakes and settling there forever."

More ships also would mean more chances for invasive species to arrive from other continents, opponents say. Zebra mussels that were first found in the Great Lakes basin in 1988 now cover all hard surfaces in the river.

Howard has seen first-hand the effects of zebra mussels while scuba diving in the river. "You can see," she said, "but all you can see is zebra mussels."

Manes, Mower, Small and Howard echo the arguments of Save the River, the Clayton-based advocacy group that is fighting the Army Corps study.

"We're not talking about filling potholes," said Stephanie Weiss, executive director of Save the River. "We're talking about completely changing the navigation system."

Save the River has fought back previous efforts to extend the shipping season through the winter months, most notably in the late 1970s under the leadership of Barry Freed, which turned out to be an assumed name for the late fugitive radical Abbie Hoffman.

Freed prevailed in that debate by arguing that surges of water beneath sheets of ice would disrupt bottom sediments, cause severe damage to harbors and habitats and erode the shoreline. Redirect the study?

McHugh, R-Pierrepont Manor, met with Army Corps officials Wednesday to tell them their study is too narrowly focused on expanding locks and dredging. He hopes to persuade them to reconfigure their study to consider the region's environmental integrity and economic stability.

Schloop of the Army Corps noted that other studies of Great Lakes ecosystems are under way, but he conceded that "one valid criticism is that there isn't a master plan that ties all this work together."

Weiss of Save the River and Manno of the Great Lakes Consortium both mentioned the \$20 billion restoration plan for the Florida Everglades while making the case for a broader study that includes Great Lakes shipping in the context of the water supply, a revitalized steel industry and an improved ecosystem.

"The biggest tragedy in letting this go forward is missing the opportunity to do a good study," Weiss said.

Besides, Manno said, spending \$10 billion and two decades to expand the St. Lawrence Seaway to a depth of 35 feet would produce an obsolete waterway still inferior to Baltimore's 50-foot channel.

"That's not going to happen," he said. "The Seaway is never going to be competitive. It's a myth."

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