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Stryker Bay plan strikes fears about development

SHIPPING: A cleanup plan stirs concerns that the loss of docks could hurt Duluth's economic-development efforts.

BY PETER PASSI
NEWS TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

While a slip may make a handy receptacle for storing contaminated sediments dredged from the St. Louis River's Stryker Bay, the city of Duluth isn't thrilled about plans that would render a working dock useless.

Tom Cotruvo, Duluth's business-development manager, said he fears that reducing waterborne access to property in West Duluth could hinder economic development in the area. That's why he and Duluth Mayor Herb Bergson have asked the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency to reconsider a cleanup plan that would force Hallett Dock No. 6 into retirement and diminish the capacity of Hallett Dock No. 7 to handle commercial traffic.

"Duluth is a port city," Cotruvo said. "Transportation, particularly waterborne commerce, has been a key component for the city's growth in the past, and we want to maintain our waterfront assets for the future."

Vessels primarily load stone and bulk cargoes at the Hallett docks.

The MPCA is considering a \$48 million plan that would involve removal of contaminated sediments from about 22 acres of Stryker Bay. Many of these dredged materials in turn would be encapsulated in Hallett's nearby slips.

Contaminants found spread over the bottom of another 7 acres of the bay would then be capped beneath a

IMAGES



Justin Hayworth/News Tribune

The Halifax loads bentonite clay at Hallett Dock No. 6, Tuesday afternoon. The dock would be retired if the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency approves a clean-up plan for Duluth's Stryker Bay.



Justin Hayworth/News Tribune

The Halifax loads bentonite clay at Hallett Dock No. 6, Tuesday afternoon. This dock would be retired and another's capacity would be greatly diminished if the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency approves a clean-up plan for Duluth's Stryker Bay.

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layer of sand and other materials.

If existing docks must be lost, Cotruvo contends the cleanup plan should provide for their replacement.

A public comment period on the plan has ended, and MPCA Commissioner Sheryl Corrigan is expected to act on the proposal in July.

Gas, tar and coke plants operating in the area between 1890 and 1962 have been blamed for a layer of coal and tar found covering the bay's bottom up to 10 feet deep.

Stryker Bay has been designated a federal Superfund site, and four companies have been required to foot its cleanup costs: XIK Corp., formerly Interlake Corp.; Honeywell, formerly Allied Signal; Domtar; and Beazer East.

Stryker Bay's status as a Superfund site has essentially stymied development in the area for the past quarter of a century, Cotruvo said.

Cotruvo said the property is Duluth's only remaining large, undeveloped site with industrial zoning and direct waterborne freight access. Other available waterfront sites are a fraction of the size.

Without a large site available, Duluth could be knocked out of consideration as host for projects such as a steel minimill to process iron nuggets, a multimodal shipping facility or a large forest-products facility, Cotruvo warned.

But Andy McDonough, business-development director for the Duluth Seaway Port Authority, said the docks are unable to handle large vessels. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers maintains the shipping channel at a depth of 23 feet that far upstream in the St. Louis River -- 4 feet shy of the minimum maintained in other parts of the port's channel network.

"It's never going to be able to handle deep-draft traffic," McDonough said. "In terms of waterborne commerce, it's probably always going to be a marginal site at best."

Jerry Fryberger, president of Hallett Dock Co., said he would prefer not to lose the use of the docks that would be affected by the proposed Stryker Bay cleanup plan. But he said the company faced the threat that powers of eminent domain could be used to take its property if Hallett failed to negotiate an agreement.

"We recognized that for us to stand up and fight this would be very foolhardy," Fryberger said. "We don't really have any decision power. It's all left up to the MPCA and the responsible parties (the four companies required to bear the cost of the cleanup)."

Fryberger said that if the plan is approved, Hallett will be forced to get by with two docks instead of four.

The company has laid plans to invest in a new railcar-unloading facility and conveyor belt system to boost the efficiency of docks it operates near the Duluth Missabe & Iron Range Railway ore docks. Fryberger remains optimistic money Hallett receives as compensation for the loss of its facilities will be sufficient to cover needed improvements.

McDonough said that while it's never pleasant to see a dock retired, "We're not going to stand in the way of Hallett getting a deal done."

Though Fryberger has come to terms with the cleanup plan, he shares Cotruvo's concerns about the effect of Duluth losing use of the docks.

"I'm very empathetic," he said. "It's so difficult if not impossible to put a new dock in."

Even if a developer could obtain the permits required to install a new dock, Fryberger estimates the construction costs would be between \$20 million and \$25 million.

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