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07/22/04 Tourist-friendly Locks fencing plan announced

By JACK STOREY/The Evening News

SAULT STE. MARIE -- A Corps of Engineers official confirmed on Wednesday that a long-awaited design revision on new security fencing at the Soo Locks will end up looking a great deal like the existing fences.

Area Engineer Stan Jacek said the revised plan calls for new fencing along the tourist-sensitive stretch facing Locks Park that differs only in a few respects from the current combination of chain link and restraining wires.

Corps officials earlier announced the principal ship viewing fence section along the MacArthur Lock would be replaced with a seven-foot wrought iron fence similar to the fencing used to surround the W. Portage Avenue park. That announcement sparked a chorus of protests from city, business and other groups that the security fencing would block a clear view of the sights visitors come to see.

Corps officials this spring agreed to review the plan for the approximately .3 mile (three-tenths of one mile) section of fencing between the display anchors at either end of the Locks Park frontage on the MacArthur Lock.

This week, the Corps announced a revised plan that will essentially replicate the fencing in use now, but with a top section angled back toward the visitor area to discourage climbers. In total, the new fence will be seven feet high -- the same height as the originally planned wrought iron barrier.

The plan calls for heavy chain link fencing from ground level to about three feet high, followed by long lines of heavy but somewhat loosely strung wire spaced at six-inch intervals over the remaining four feet of fencing. The vertical spacing of fence "fabric" and horizontal wire closely mimics the current fencing.

Six-inch spacing between the heavy wire strands fronting on the MacArthur Lock allow a mostly unimpeded view of passing ships and several clear zones for unobstructed camera angles.

Jacek said some published reports about use of materials in the

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MacArthur Lock section were in error. With some irritation, Jacek said the lower chain link section will be built in the same galvanized steel material used in the existing fence. By some accounts, the Corps plan was to use prohibitively expensive stainless steel chain link.

Not so, Jacek insisted, saying the only stainless will be in the lines of long wire restraints above the chain link bottom panels. The Corps opted for stainless to reduce painting costs for the wire used in the current fence.

"It's much more user-friendly," Jacek said of the revised fencing plan.

The original wrought iron design will replace chain link from the upper display anchor in Locks Park to the Corps' storage yard one quarter mile or so to the west, near the International and Canadian National Bridges. From the bridges to the far western end of the Locks approach piers, generally called West Pier, fences will remain in chain link, bottom to top.

Work on the western end of the new wrought iron fencing has already begun with dozens of decorative posts already placed in concrete footings just inside the existing chain link.

The fencing is part of a \$5 million security upgrade at the Soo Locks that also includes more powerful lighting over the bulk of the locks and adjacent approach canals.

The new lighting quadruples the number of lighting "heads" mounted on each of the hundreds of new light poles in the Locks complex. In addition to the four-fold increase in lighting "heads," the new setup uses 350-watt metal halide bulbs that shed more than three times the light as the single bulbs being replaced.

Jacek said the new lighting, much of it already in use, makes a dramatic difference in the central Soo Locks zone. "It looks like daylight at night from the tower," he said. Jacek added that vessel masters have already voiced unanimous approval of the new intense lighting scheme.

Chief electrician Jim Collins said the new light is so bright, the Locks look like a night football game from overhead on the International Bridge. "It's so bright you can see the grass is green on the video screen," he said of the new lighting.

The two Corps officials said the new metal halide lights carry another advantage. Unlike the older lamps rapidly being replaced, the new lamps give out white light, not the orange-tinted light that many claim causes undue eye strain.

Even though the new lighting is many orders of magnitude greater than the older system, Jacek said the new lights are, "... easy on the eyes."

Collins said private contractors have a long stretch of the inner complex to go before the new lighting scheme is completed. The new, brighter lights will eventually extend from the western-most visitor platform in Locks Park to an area two light poles to the west of the two bridges that cross the upper locks approach canal.

From that point to the end of West Pier, the older "orange" lighting will be retained.

The Corps' security plan for the elevated viewing platforms was not announced. This spring, the initial plan to surround the platforms with

Plexiglas drew similar complaints from tourist interests as the first-round fencing plan.

Currently the platforms are only partially enclosed with transparent Plexiglas to form a wind break against the often strong westerly winds that regularly sweep the Soo Locks complex.

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