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Fox River to be open for navigation again in 10 years



Boats are 'stacked' recently heading north through the locks in De Pere (photo by Tina Gohr)..

By Anna Krejci News-Chronicle

The federal government and the U.S. Army Corps. of Engineers transferred ownership of the Fox River lock system to Wisconsin on Friday. Wisconsin Gov. Jim Doyle signed the deed during a news conference at a riverside restaurant in Appleton on Friday.

With federal, state and local money, the state plans to restore 14 of the system's 17 locks to working order, and maintain the entire system, closed for more than 20 years.

The state's leaders hailed the project as a way to revive Wisconsin's river economy, culture and recreation.

The federal government, which had controlled the lock system since 1872, closed the waterway to commercial traffic in 1983.

It was going to permanently shut down the locks, a move that would have cost \$12 million. Instead, Wisconsin is taking control of the lock system with \$11.8 million from the federal government that can be put towards the system's rehabilitation.

Lt. Colonel Donald Lauzon, district engineer for the Detroit District of the U.S. Army COE, presented an \$11.8 million check to Wisconsin and a beacon light from one of the locks to Doyle. Lauzon said Friday the change in ownership of some 140 acres marked one of the largest land transfers the U.S. Army COE has ever done.

"We hope that we will be as good a steward of these locks and acreage" as have the Army COE, Doyle

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said.

Doyle said the revived lock system will make the waterway conducive to river front development, parks, restaurants, river walks, historical boat tours and dinner cruises.

To bar exotic species from settling in the Fox River, the Rapide Croche Lock and dam by Wrightstown is to remain closed permanently. A boat lift is to be constructed there to ensure full navigation along the 37 miles of river between Green Bay and Menasha.

The state will manage the lock system through the Fox River Navigational Authority. Six of its members - two each from Brown, Winnebago and Outagamie counties - were appointed to the authority by the governor.

Will Stark of De Pere serves on the authority as one of Brown County's representatives. He said it will be 7-9 years before it is possible to navigate all the way from Green Bay to Lake Winnebago on the Fox River.

The authority's next step is talking with engineers about drawing up a plan to repair the locks, one by one, starting from Menasha and moving north.

The De Pere and Little Rapids Locks, both in Brown County, are two of three locks that are in working order.

In addition to the \$11.8 million of federal money already relegated to the locks' repair, local charities and private donors must raise a total of \$2.7 million to further support the system. The \$2.7 million will be matched with state and federal government money.

Stark is in charge of the authority's fundraising. The Green Bay community is asked to raise a third to one half of the \$1.4 million still needed to reach the \$2.7 million mark.

"The biggest benefit Green Bay is going to see is recreational," Stark said.

U.S. Congressional leaders and state legislators attributed the state's successful acquisition of the locks to bi-partisan efforts. Democratic U.S. Sens. Herb Kohl and Russ Feingold and Republican U.S. Reps. Mark Green of Green Bay and Tom Petri of Fond du Lac, were identified as some of the project's many advocates. A series of Wisconsin governors supported the creation of the Fox River Navigational Authority.

State Sen. Dave Hansen, D-Green Bay, said he hopes there will be more bipartisan cooperation in

the future.

"We wanted it done, we knew it was good for the state, and it happened," Hansen said.



Email [The Green Bay News-Chronicle](mailto:info@gogreenbay.com)

The Green Bay News-Chronicle
P.O. Box 2467
133 S. Monroe St.
Green Bay WI 54306
Phone: 920-432-2941
Fax: 920-432-8581

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