

New Corps head credits staff for smooth operation

By JACK STOREY/The Evening News

SAULT STE. MARIE - New Area Engineer Al Klein settled into his new job as the head man at the Corps of Engineers' Soo Locks operation to find matters well in hand.

He said the much-reduced staff at the Locks, power plants and channel maintenance units in need of relatively little direction from above. "There are so many good people around here who know this place so well," he said.

Klein said the current staff of 94 is a far cry from the more than 400 who, not long ago, staffed the Sault Area operation. At the same time, he said the much-reduced staff has not crimped the Locks operation in a material way.

"We would always like to do more, but we're making do with what we have," he said.

"Plan for the worst, then hope it doesn't happen," he added.

The new area engineer said some hope of change in the Corps steady reduction in the Sault Area workforce may be in the wind. He said there is some talk the 2007 fiscal year budget is a "healthy" one, but quickly added that official word has not yet trickled down to his level.

Asked the status of the few ongoing special projects at the Locks, he said work on the damaged West Center Pier is on schedule - about half finished and cooking along toward the contracted October completion date. He said the repair will resemble a nearby section of the same undermined pier completed two years ago using steel sheet piling driven into bedrock below a new concrete cap.

Planning for winter work includes the "dewatering" of the Poe Lock for the short off-season period so crews can attend to testing and pintle replacement on the north side gate at the upper end of the giant lock chamber.

Planning for a new Soo Lock continues to proceed through design work at the Corps' Huntington District under existing funding to cover planning. No substantial change is apparent in funding arrangements for actual construction, however.

The new lock project has been running in neutral for several years with no recent signs that actual work on the long-anticipated big lock job will be forthcoming anytime soon.

Klein said the Sault Area Office continues to rotate members of its limited staff into high priority Corps projects elsewhere. He said one staff members has rotated to the Gulf Coast at Lake Charles, La. to assist with ongoing Hurricane Katrina recovery projects there.

Another has detached for a year of duty much farther afield in Iraq, he said.

If big, new engineering projects are not on the immediate horizon at the Locks, Klein said the Corps is experimenting with a small switch in the rules governing lock assignment for ships using the canal. For the next two years, vessels with maximum beams of up to 78 feet will be permitted to use the MacArthur Lock under a special dispensation agreed to by the Detroit District.

For several years, Canadian vessel operators have complained that the MacArthur does not admit vessels of more than 76 feet in beam, thus incurring delays at the Soo Locks not encountered in other locks of the same size in the Welland Canal and Seaway.

A number of Canadian vessels have been rebuilt to a slightly larger version of "Seaway size" in recent years, only to find they were diverted to the larger Poe Lock because of the size creep.

Until now, the Corps resisted requests that size limits for the "Mac" Lock be increased to accommodate the new interpretation of "Seaway size," top be met with resistance here.

(For decades, "Seaway size" in Great Lakes vessels was the maximum allowed by the several entities operating locks on the St. Lawrence Seaway system - 730 feet long by 75 or 76 feet wide.

In recent years other authorities on the Seaway have given way on the size question to the beefed up version in fashion recently - 740 feet overall and 78 feet on the beam.)

Klein cautioned that the experimental 78-foot dispensation in the MacArthur Lock will not be a blank check for any vessel purportedly of that beam. To qualify, he said ship owners must make detailed vessel drawings available to the Corps for review and verification of a ship's actual dimensions.

Asked if the Corps has been asked to step into the ongoing sewage dumping situation downriver off Sugar Island, Klein said, "Not so far."

An 18-year veteran of area engineer duties at the Corps Duluth Office and a native of Dollar Bay in the western Upper Peninsula, Klein said he does not plan to change his lifelong status as a Green Bay Packer fan. He said 18 years in Minnesota Viking country never changed his affiliation with the Packers and he has no plan to appear in Honolulu Blue and Silver just because the Locks lie in the Detroit Lions' territory.