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FOLLOWING THE MONEY

Soo Lock on inside track for funding



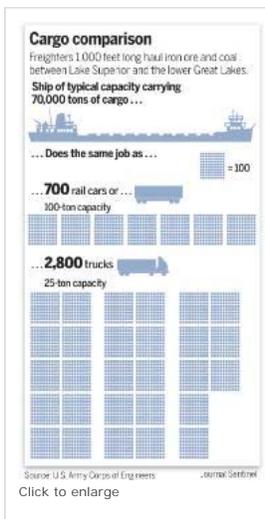
Jude McConkey/Sault Ste. Marie Evening News

The M.T. Algosar, a 450-foot Canadian tanker, was the first ship of the 2009 shipping season to pass through the Poe Lock at Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., on March 26, a day after the lock reopened.

Skeptics say money would be better spent elsewhere

By Dan Egan of the Journal Sentinel

Posted: April 5, 2009



President Barack Obama has made no secret he is prioritizing billions in stimulus funds for "shovel-ready" public works projects - jobs that can start almost immediately because their designs are set and they've cleared regulatory hurdles.

That's good news for proponents of a \$490 million boat lock about to be built in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, a monster-sized - and yes, shovel-ready - project that had been in search of a deep-pocketed patron since Congress authorized it nearly a quarter century ago.

It's bad news for taxpayer watchdogs and environmentalists who question the wisdom of spending so much money essentially to duplicate an existing lock, especially when they say there are more pressing needs facing the pollution-ravaged Great Lakes.

"With all the need for Great Lakes restoration and the impact shipping is having on the Great Lakes, a half billion dollars for an extra lock is like a slap in the face," says Jennifer Nalbene of the conservation group Great Lakes United.

Project advocates contend that the lock is desperately needed as a backup to the 40-year-old Poe Lock that allows 1,000-foot-long freighters to sail between Lake Superior and the lower lakes of Michigan, Huron and Erie. Trouble at this choke point, they note - an accident or perhaps maintenance issues - could cripple iron ore and coal shipments to Midwestern steel mills and power plants. They point to the thousands of troops deployed to protect the remote outpost during World War II as evidence of its strategic value in feeding raw materials to industry.

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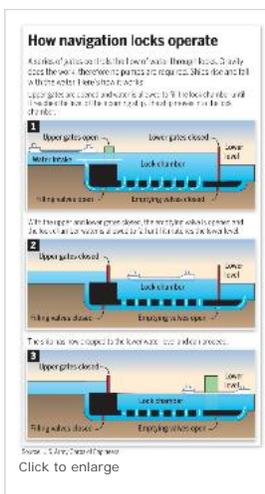
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"We did not keep 10,000 troops in Michigan's Upper Peninsula because we had soldiers to spare," Jim Weakley, president of the Lake Carriers' Association, testified this year before the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee to lobby for the new lock. "Loss of the Soo Locks would have meant unconditional surrender to Hitler, Mussolini and Hirohito, and our leaders knew it."

Dave Knight, who works for the Great Lakes Commission, an agency created by the Great Lakes states to promote economic development and conservation, says the lock remains an inviting target even today.

"This is just a really potentially vulnerable chokepoint where somebody could really make a statement," he says.

That argument rubs some people raw.

"Trying to fund infrastructure on the basis of fear is irresponsible," says Steve Ellis, a former U.S. Coast Guard officer who now works for the nonpartisan Taxpayers for Common Sense. "The scariest thing going on right now is looking at our budget deficits and the looming debt."

'A make-work project'

Conservationists say they have no burning opposition to the lock based on environmental concerns; it is going to be built on the footprint of two smaller, obsolete locks. They also say they have no problem with spending hundreds of millions of dollars to maintain the locks and channels in the existing navigation corridor to keep them operating safely and efficiently.

But they do have a problem with this project.

"We're trying to point out the fact that creating an extra lock is a make-work project, at best," says Nalbene.

There are indeed boatloads of other economic and environmental needs facing the world's largest freshwater ecosystem.

They include:

- **Great Lakes harbors.** The shipping industry has estimated that a nearly \$250 million backlog exists in maintenance dredging that is needed just to keep Great Lakes harbors and channels at minimum depths to handle fully loaded freighters.

Part of the problem, ironically, is that dredging on the St. Clair River to open the upper Great Lakes to freighters increased the outflow of Lakes Michigan and Huron, dropping their long-term average by at least 16 inches.

The river was dredged three times during the last century in the name of commercial navigation, and each time, the U.S. government authorized construction of some sort of underwater dam-like structure to compensate for the lake-lowering effect of an artificially expanded river. The Army Corps of Engineers has never done that work.

- **Invasive species.** The overseas shipping industry has been blamed for introducing dozens of species that have cost Great Lakes states billions of dollars from fouled beaches, fish population crashes and clogged industrial pipes. Obama has promised zero tolerance for any new species invasions, but Congress failed over the past several years to force the shipping industry to install costly water-treatment systems on their ship-steadying ballast tanks.
- **Industrial pollution.** Decades after 31 dangerously polluted "areas of concern" were designated on the U.S. side of the Great Lakes, not one of these industrially polluted areas has been cleaned up to the point where it was taken off the list. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates as much as \$4.5 billion worth of work remains to be done to make these areas and similar sites in Canada safe for recreation and economic development.
- **Seaway needs.** A 2007 Army Corps study said the entire system of locks and channels that creates a 2,400-mile-long shipping route between Duluth, Minn., and the Atlantic Ocean is crumbling in places and will need about \$2.5 billion in repairs and maintenance over the next four decades.

That report did not single out a new lock in Sault St. Marie as a necessary part of that program; it did not even suggest funding it.

- **Basic sanitation.** A 2005 federal report noted there was about a \$13.7 billion need for repairs and upgrades of wastewater treatment systems in the Great Lakes basin, which holds about 90% of the nation's fresh surface water.
- **Ecological restoration.** The Bush administration identified about \$26 billion worth of environmental needs for the Great Lakes, a figure that included the sewer upgrades. The administration failed to fund most of it.

It's in this context that eyebrows are being raised - and fingers pointed - over plans to build the backup lock.

"Taxpayers are paying twice," says Cameron Davis of the Alliance for the Great Lakes. "We're paying for the ships to come in, and we're paying for the damage they're causing."

Stimulus money hoped for

Supporters note that the new lock, which enjoys bipartisan support, would be built to serve the "laker" fleet. Those boats are too big to leave the Great Lakes because they can't fit through the smaller St. Lawrence Seaway locks downstream. They also can't be blamed for introducing exotic species, though they have been implicated in helping them spread through the lakes.

Roger Gauthier, who works for the Great Lakes Commission on projects to restore the health of the lakes, says the need for a backup lock to protect the region's raw material-dependent industries is profound. The Army Corps reports that the Poe Lock unexpectedly - but briefly - shut down four times last year. The agency says if the lock were to be shuttered for a month, it could deal a \$160 million economic blow to the region.

Still, the Army Corps classifies the overall Great Lakes lock system as highly dependable.

Not everybody buys the idea of spending \$500 million on a safety net for one piece of that reliable system.

"Let's face it. It's not about ships, it's about goods. And in most cases you can move goods on other forms (of transportation), at least on a temporary basis," Ellis says.

Another freighter-size lock operates in Sault St. Marie along with the Poe, but it's too small to handle the super-sized lakers that haul about 70% of the 80 million tons of cargo that flow through the Soo Locks annually. The Poe itself is slated to receive a \$70 million upgrade in the next several years.

Gauthier says construction of a new lock should not be framed as a project that will remove funding from other needs.

"This should not take one iota away from (programs) going toward ecological restoration," he says.

Obama's 2010 budget calls for \$475 million to go toward things such as cleaning up contaminated harbor sediments, reducing existing pollution sources and stemming the flow of invasive species into the Great Lakes.

That is considered a down payment on a \$26 billion plan put together under the Bush administration, and conservationists hope more stimulus dollars will be used to jump-start the effort.

Proponents of the new lock are equally hopeful the president's stimulus package will bring more dollars for its construction. The stimulus plan sets aside \$4.6 billion for the Army Corps' civil works program, but specifics on how that money will be spent have yet to be released.

Yet even if no stimulus package money flows toward the new lock, the shovels are expected to start digging soon because Congress set aside \$17 million this year to construct a set of watertight walls known as coffer dams at the lock site.

The plan is for the federal government to pay 100% of the new lock's cost, but it wasn't always that way.

Congress initially required that the Great Lakes states pay for more than one-third of its costs, which were initially pegged at \$225 million. The states failed to come up with the required dollars, even after their share was cut from 35% to about 24% in the 1990s.

In 2007, Congress agreed that the federal government would fully fund the project, the estimated cost of which has more than doubled since 1986.

If everything goes smoothly, construction of the new lock would be about a 10-year project.

Done deal?

No public hearings on the matter are scheduled.

The extent of the conservation community's recent involvement in the issue is one letter signed by 17 groups to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi earlier this year urging Congress to reconsider, and to instead channel funds into restoration projects.

"We just didn't think it would happen," says Great Lakes United's Nalbone.

She notes that things have changed since Congress first approved the lock in 1986, the year water levels in Lakes Michigan and Huron hit their all-time high. She says the whole shipping industry could be drowning in trouble in the coming decades if, as many scientists predict, lake levels drop because of increased evaporation tied to the warming Great Lakes.

"They're thinking 20 years in the past," she says.

Upper Peninsula Congressman Bart Stupak says the time for talking and planning has passed.

It's time to shovel.

"No project meets the definition of *shovel ready* more than the replacement Soo Lock," the Democrat says.

"After 13 years and \$20 million of federally funded studies and preparation, there is no excuse for not building the new Soo Lock."

Stupak noted that the Poe Lock is the busiest in the world.

Taxpayer watchdog Ellis is left with one question.

"Does it work?" he asks of the Poe Lock. "There is a lot of pressure here to create basically 100% redundancy. It boggles the mind."



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