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To: jen@glu.org
From: Jennifer Nalbone <jen@glu.org>
Subject: Detroit News: Great lakes passage being neglected
Mime-Version: 1.0
Content-Type: text/plain; charset="us-ascii"; format=flowed

Great Lakes passage being neglected
Without needed facelift, Midwest could see shipping industry vanish, experts say.

By James V. Higgins
The Detroit News
October 13, 2002

When the St. Lawrence Seaway opened the Great Lakes to expanded ocean-going shipping in 1959, some Midwest cities dreamed of becoming major ports on the scale of Baltimore, Seattle or Long Beach.

It never happened.

But Congress soon may authorize a long-term study of the economic, engineering and environmental feasibility of modernizing the seaway.

Experts agree that the system of locks, channels and ports that was optimistically called "the nation's fourth seacoast" in 1959 cannot exist forever in its present condition. With international trade growing and industries rapidly becoming linked to global chains of commerce, the economic implications are huge.

They see only two choices: renovate, at a potential cost of billions, or watch ocean-borne shipping on the Great Lakes end.

"The truth is, unless these things happen, we're looking at another Erie Canal," said W. Steven Olinek, deputy director of the Detroit/Wayne County Port Authority.

That image has historical meaning for Detroit and other major Great Lakes ports. The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, linking the Hudson River and

Lake Erie, was instrumental in the settlement of the Midwest. Once an engineering marvel, it ultimately lapsed into disuse.

But its overall impact probably was greater in relative terms than the St. Lawrence Seaway, which never fulfilled its promise.

Just as it opened, the ocean-borne freight industry was undergoing a fundamental change: the increased use of standardized containers that, packed with a variety of goods, could be loaded without repacking on ships, trucks or rail cars.

Smaller container ships and tramp freighters still navigate the seaway. But in the early 1960s, the industry moved toward construction of larger ships to accommodate more containers. Hapag-Lloyd, the German freight company, has launched one that is twice as wide as the largest lock on the St. Lawrence/Great Lakes system.

As it stands today, roughly 95 percent of ocean container carrying capacity cannot pass the locks to reach Great Lakes ports. In addition, the average depth of connecting channels is about 25.5 feet, too shallow for many ocean-bound vessels.

The seasonal nature of the seaway is another drawback. Ice shuts it down three months a year. Technologies exist that would help extend the shipping season -- a combination of ice-breaking ships and strategically placed booms to prevent ice floes from piling up in constricted spots. But they are used only sporadically.

The system is aging. Locks on the Welland Canal linking lakes Erie and Ontario are 70 years old, and are rapidly reaching a point where intensive and expensive maintenance will be required just to keep the status quo.

Another factor is the structure of seaway management. The system is co-owned and managed by Canada and the United States. But between the two, there has been no strategic planning about the future of the seaway.

"That is not the way you manage infrastructure," says Steve Fisher of the American Great Lakes Ports Association.
Those are the conditions the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers confronted in 1999 when Congress ordered it to conduct a preliminary survey of the seaway, its condition and potential benefits of improving it.

That initial survey, completed this year, found a detailed study is warranted. It confirmed the deterioration of the system and its growing obsolescence. It projected that improvements could prompt a fivefold increase in container shipments.

Both ocean-going and lakes-only traffic could benefit, the Corps said, depending on the extent of the improvements made.

Economic benefits could reach $1.44 billion a year, with creation of more than 100,000 jobs, the Corps said. "The Great Lakes states and two Canadian provinces, if you made them one country, would be one of the largest economies in the world," said Fisher, the Washington representative for Great Lakes ports. "That economic activity includes a lot of trade, and that trade has to be accommodated. And shame on us, shame on our planners, if our transportation system stifles our economic growth."

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