

# The Paducah Sun



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The construction project was expected to cost \$775 million and take 12 years. Now the projected cost is \$2.9 billion and it will take at least 26 years. What does that tell you?

It must be a government project.

Sure, unforeseen events and rising costs make it hard to complete some projects on time and within budget. But when a project takes twice as long and costs four times as much as promised, you know your tax dollars are at work.

This project is the Olmsted Locks and Dam on the Ohio River. Once completed, the new locks are expected to save shippers \$500 million a year in fuel, labor and shipping expenses. Those added costs today are passed onto the consumer.

After consuming three times the funding originally authorized, the project is far from complete. Initially expected to be finished five years ago, the projected completion date has been pushed back to 2019.

The story is similar at Kentucky Lock on the Tennessee River. That project, which was authorized six years after Olmsted, is now projected to cost \$1.1 billion, more than twice its original authorization.

Both the original locks were built around 1930, with 50-year lifespans, which means their replacements are 30 years overdue — and counting. Both were built when tows were smaller; the projects will extend the lengths of the locks from 600 to 1,200 feet to accommodate today's longer tows.

The limits of the locks mean many tows must be broken in two. The extra time is compounded when several tows are waiting to pass through the

same lock. If you read Joe Walker's cover stories on the Sunday Business section, you know that at one point 66 tows were backed up at Olmsted. The waits are sometimes measured in days rather than hours. And that adds \$500 an hour per tow for fuel, labor and other costs.

Barge companies have contended with inconsistent annual funding since the projects' inceptions. This, despite the fact that the companies are paying a diesel fuel tax of 20 cents a gallon as the industry's share to support the lock and dam projects.

Even the trillion-dollar stimulus package lawmakers approved last year did not lock in funding for completing the projects. The stimulus targeted "shovel-ready" projects to create jobs quickly; nothing is more shovel ready than these projects underway. But Congress did not make them a priority.

In an effort to secure a federal government commitment to provide guaranteed funding to keep the projects on schedule, the industry is volunteering to raise its own commitment by paying an additional 6-9 cents per gallon. The plan, drafted by the Inland Waterways Users Board, would also set a cap on the industry's share of construction costs to protect shippers from government dawdling.

Steve Little, president of Paducah-based Crouse Corp., is heading up the effort as chairman of the group, lobbying Congress on behalf of the entire industry.

The projects have been great for the regional economy, creating hundreds of construction jobs. And the eventual savings on shipping costs will benefit the economy.

After the federal government committed to the projects some 20 years ago, Congress should never have wavered on the funding. Having failed that test, Congress should approve the river industry's plan, protecting shippers from politics and bureaucratic delay.