

The Paducah Sun



By JOE WALKER

jwalker@paducahsun.com

GILBERTSVILLE, Ky. — A shipping industry proposal to nearly double annual funding for priority lock-and-dam projects would accelerate the anticipated completion of Kentucky Lock by 10 years.

The cost of expanding the lock from 600 to 1,200 feet is now \$713.4 million — \$200 million more than its base authorization in 1994 — with \$383.1 million remaining. The industry plan would move up targeted completion from 2029 to 2019, although the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers hopes for enough funding to finish by 2016.

Shippers propose to increase their fuel-tax share of lock construction nationwide in return for government guarantees of more efficient planning and covering cost overruns. Current annual funding uncertainties are a poor business model, said Steve Little, president of Paducah's Crouse Corporation.

“It’s like building a house. How many people here would start building a home if the funds are not available?” he said. “That’s what has been happening with so many projects of this type.”

Completed in 1932, Kentucky Lock has average delays of three to seven hours per tow. Projected barge traffic increases are expected to worsen the delays.

Much of the work so far has been in moving U.S. 62 and Paducah & Louisville Railway downstream to make room for the expansion. Crews finished the segment last fall, but the start of lock work — on hold for three

years for lack of funding — remained in jeopardy until the corps received \$40.7 million in stimulus money, said Don Getty, Kentucky Lock project engineer.

Stimulus funding allowed the corps to hire Thalle Construction Co. of Hillsboro, N.C., to partially build upstream lock walls, resulting in 462 direct and indirect jobs over the next 27 months, Lt. Col. Anthony Mitchell, head of the corps' Nashville District, said at a March 5 dedication of the lock project.

“There is no doubt that without the Stimulus Act, these jobs would not have been generated for at least another two years — probably more,” he said.

But the stimulus funding represents only about 10 percent of the funding needed to complete the lock, Mitchell said. Finishing by 2016 hinges on adequate funding in fiscal 2012 and beyond.

The work could get mothballed again in two years unless the shipping industry plan goes into effect, he said.

Contact Joe Walker, Sun business editor, at 270-575-8656.

Kentucky Lock

Projected cost: \$1.1 billion

Projected completion: 2016 or beyond

Contractor: Thalle Construction, \$40.7 million

Jobs: 200 direct, 262 indirect over 27 months of first phase

U.S. economic impact: \$123 million

Source: Corps of Engineers, Inland Marine Transportation System Business Model Final Report