post-gazette.com
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Barging ahead: Congress should make locks and dams a priority

EDITORIAL

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 05, 2010 01:24 AM

All of us know the old proverb that begins "For want of a nail a shoe was lost" and describes cascading consequences that include the loss of a horse, a rider, a battle and finally a kingdom. When Congress comes back on Sept. 13, its members need to recall this piece of wisdom amid all the deficit-driven din for spending nothing and raising no taxes.

Some priorities cannot be put off any longer. For want of sensible, sustained funding, the Pittsburgh region and the nation are increasingly running the risk of an economic disaster on their rivers. The locks and dams that keep the commercial lifeblood flowing are often old and severely stressed -- and that inevitably translates into a crisis waiting to happen.

Pittsburgh, the second-largest inland port in the country and a city that owes its founding to its rivers, knows this problem firsthand. The 17 locks and dams in the region are mostly in the range of 70 to 100 years old and they show the deterioration of age. As with so much infrastructure in America, the federal government's attitude to investment has been shortsighted, too often assuming that out of sight is out of mind.

Consider the latest funding for the Lower Mon project involving upgrades at Braddock, Elizabeth and Charleroi, a project that may be considered the poster child for pressing need and the dysfunction of federal funding. The project started in 1994 and was scheduled to last 10 years at a cost of $750 million. Although the Braddock segment was completed, the rest has grown to a 30-year project at a cost of $1.2 billion.

To be sure, some of this is due to engineering complications, but seesaw funding is a large part of why taxpayer dollars have not been used wisely. The Pittsburgh region did well as a result of stimulus funding -- receiving about $110 million for navigation projects, including $84 million for the Lower Mon project alone.

Without that infusion of funds, the Lower Mon work might have closed down by now. But how much does it get going forward? In President Barack Obama's 2011 budget, just $2 million is put aside for it -- a figure picked up by both the House and Senate. The feast is over, the famine begins.

If luck runs out and barge traffic is blocked by lock and dam failure, how would this affect a company like Consol Energy, which annually moves 24 million tons of coal in barges on the Upper Ohio, Monongahela and Allegheny rivers to 10 power plants around the region? According to James G. Grech, a senior vice president for marketing, the substitute for 90,000 barge lockages would be about 960,000 trucks.

The proverbial nails to hold the system together do not come cheaply -- a concern at a time of towering national deficits. But the industry itself is offering part of the solution, remarkably, to the extent of accepting increased taxes on itself.

Barge industry representatives and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers met and worked out a capital development plan that includes prioritizing the completion of projects across the entire system and increasing by 30 percent to 45 percent the existing fuel tax of 20 cents-a-gallon paid by the barge and towing industry. That wouldn't pay all the cost, but it would be a great start.

Waterways Council Inc., which represents a broad coalition of stakeholders, hopes that the capital development plan can be included in the likely legislative vehicle, the Water Resource Development Act 2010 (HR 5892).

Congress must recognize that this industry, which is greener than road or rail, needs urgent help with a crumbling infrastructure and that in the long-term committing funds wisely is a better policy for the nation's future prosperity than miserly neglect. Without that, there's no knowing what crisis may follow for the want of political will.