



## VIEWPOINTS: We must invest in our waterways

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By **Special to The Birmingham News**

By **TIM PARKER**

While Birmingham is not located directly on a river like some other cities in Alabama, it benefits from being close enough to a waterways transportation artery to reap the benefits of some of the manufacturing facilities that are in Birmingham, such as Alabama Power Co., U.S. Steel, American Cast Iron & Pipe Co., McWane Pipe, O'Neal Steel, Drummond Coal, and Walter Energy and others. These companies ship or receive goods and commodities on the Black Warrior River.

In fact, according to 2008 data, there were more than 130 manufacturing facilities, terminals and docks across our state that shipped and received bulk freight tonnage. And those bulk products are moved on our waterways for the lowest cost and in the most environmentally friendly way.

Birmingham residents, like the rest of the country, may not fully understand why the rivers and waterways are so important to our region and to the nation. Our nation's inland waterways are envied by the world because this natural "water highway" running throughout our country provides key access for commerce.

And modern lock-and-dam infrastructure on those waterways is critical to the United States remaining competitive in the world marketplace, to environmental protection, to energy efficiency, to the sustainability of well-paying American jobs and to highway traffic congestion relief. Inland waterways transportation is a key component of the intermodal transportation network and keeps energy costs down, our agriculture and coal exports up, and Americans -- and Alabamians -- gainfully employed.

The Black Warrior River, the Tenn-Tom Waterway and the Tennessee River allow for about 80 million tons of critical bulk commodities valued at about \$19 billion to be transported for export to the world market out of the Port of Mobile.

But waterways infrastructure -- the locks and dams on the rivers -- is in need of reinvestment, just as are roadways and runways and bridges. The lock-and-dam system was built largely in the 1930s and is showing its age, with concrete crumbling, miter gates falling into the river and electrical systems failing. As well, many locks currently in use are too small for today's larger tows and are susceptible to closures and long delays that ultimately mean consumers will pay higher costs for goods and electricity.

The challenge to modernize the inland waterways' infrastructure is the need to create and implement an improved program for the future. The current project funding and delivery system is inefficient and results in much wasted time and money. And while the industry, through a diesel fuel tax paid into the Inland Waterways Trust Fund, has made significant investment in the reliability of the system, far too few navigation projects have been completed. The inland waterways industry is the only commercial segment of the waterways to pay a tax for its use, despite many other beneficiaries such as recreation; stable pools of water for industrial, municipal and agricultural use; hydropower; flood protection; and enhanced waterfront property values. Delays to modernize the lock-and-dam system stretch out over decades, wasting taxpayer dollars and losing transportation cost savings for our national economy.

For example, the Olmsted Locks and Dam project on the Ohio River, when completed, is estimated to save shippers \$500 million annually in fuel, labor and shipping expenses. Instead of providing relief, the project has dragged on due to under-funding, changing requirements and continually rising costs. The project was initially expected to cost \$775 million over eight years and is now projected at \$2.1 billion over 26 years. All this additional cost is passed on to consumers from food to oil prices.

Fortunately, there is a legislative proposal known as the Inland Waterways Capital Development Plan, a comprehensive, consensus-based package of recommendations formulated by a group of nationwide experts to address the need to improve the continued vitality of the U.S. inland navigation system. The plan was developed over a two-year period by the Inland Waterways User Board (on which I serve as a member), which is a federally chartered advisory body that advises Congress on priority navigation projects. If adopted, perhaps as part of a potential Water Resources Development Act this year, the Inland Waterways Capital Development Plan will better address the needs of the entire inland waterways system and provide more funding for greatly needed infrastructure improvements.

To date, the proposal is supported by more than 200 industry members, including national organizations, state, regional and local organizations, and industry groups including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, American Land Conservancy, National Corn Growers Association, National Grain & Feed Association, Steel Manufacturers Association, National Mining Association, National Council of Farm Cooperatives, and many others from diverse segments of our national economy -- all of whom benefit from inland waterways transportation.

This plan would -- for the first time ever -- prioritize navigation projects across the entire inland waterways system, improve the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' project management and processes to deliver projects on time and on budget, and recommend a funding mechanism that is affordable to meet the system's needs.

In addition to getting better control on costs and completion of projects, overall this plan would benefit our nation so that we can continue to enjoy our energy-efficient, congestion-relieving U.S. waterways transportation system. These funding parameters would be applied to the entire system rather than just on

a project-by-project basis so that more of the system's critical projects can be completed more efficiently and the waterways can keep America moving.

If we maintain the status quo and make no improvements to the current delivery process, only six projects can be completed over the next 20 years. However, if Congress adopts the Capital Development Plan as proposed, 25 critical infrastructure projects will be completed over the next 20 years.

This proposal is practical and reasonable, reins in escalating costs and provides a path for the future of transporting our nation's -- and Alabama's -- valuable products.

Investment in waterways transportation infrastructure is a way forward for our region and for the rest of the nation. Let's keep Alabama and America moving by adopting this plan.

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