



STAFF FILE PHOTO

A tugboat pushing eight barges waits to exit the Howell Heflin Lock on the Tenn-Tom Waterway as the gates begin to open.

Help waterways

Support proposal that would improve infrastructure

As Tuscaloosa County residents, we love our area for many reasons, but may not fully appreciate a critical asset that keeps our local, regional and state economy humming. Tuscaloosa and Northport (which incidentally gets its very name from the river) straddle the Black Warrior River.

The original locks and dams on the Black Warrior River were built at the end of the 1800s by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and have been updated and modernized since then. The Warrior River enables our region to be connected to the Gulf of Mexico, via the Port of Mobile, and provides a link to the rest of this country's vast inland waterway system. This river transportation artery facilitates and protects thousands of jobs in our region.

Today, the Black Warrior River, the Tenn-Tom Waterway and the Tennessee River (the principle rivers that our company, Parker Towing Co., operates on) transport about 80 million tons (2008 data) of cargo valued around \$19 billion.

Hunt Oil Company, Nucor Steel, Alabama Power Company, Drummond Coal Company, Walter Energy and others (and the thousands of jobs they represent) use the river to ship and receive their cargo. In fact, according to 2008 data, there were about 132 manufacturing terminals and docks across our state that shipped and received river cargo. Those products are moved on our waterways for the lowest cost and in the most environmentally friendly way.

The locks and dams on our rivers also provide hydroelectric power, flood control, drinking water, aids to navigation for recreational boaters, water for our industries and waterfront economic development. Our nation's inland waterways are envied by the world because this natural "water highway" running throughout our country provides a key component for an intermodal

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transportation network, and keeps energy costs down, our agriculture and coal exports up, and Americans — and Alabamians — gainfully employed.

Modern lock and dam infrastructure is critical to the United States remaining competitive, to environmental protection, to energy efficiency, to the sustainment of well-paying American jobs and to highway traffic congestion relief.

But waterways infrastructure is in need of reinvestment, just as are roadways, runways and bridges. Much of the U.S. lock and dam system was built in the 1930s and is showing its age, with crumbling concrete, failing miter gates, and unreliable, aged electrical systems. Many locks in use are too small for today's larger tows and are susceptible to closures and long delays that ultimately mean increased costs for consumer goods and electricity in our area.

The challenge to modernize our 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 wasted time and money. And while the towing 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. Delays to complete lock and dam system projects stretch out over decades, wasting billions of taxpayer dollars.

But there is a legislative proposal known as the Inland Waterways Capital Development Plan, a comprehensive, consensus-based package of recom-

mendations 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 and some of the brightest and best minds of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; as part of a joint public-private task force. If adopted, perhaps as part of a potential Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) in 2011, the Inland Waterways Capital Development Plan will better address the entire inland waterways system and provide more funding for greatly needed infrastructure improvements.

This plan would — for the first time ever — prioritize navigation projects across the entire inland waterways system, improve the 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.

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

This proposal is practical, reasonable, reigns in skyrocketing costs, and provides a way forward for the future of transporting our nation's — and our state's — essential commodities.

Let's urge our senators and congressmen to support waterways transportation infrastructure investment as a way to keep Alabama and America moving!

Tim Parker is chairman of Parker Towing Co., a river barge service, in Northport and is a former state representative. He serves on the Inland Waterways Users board of directors.