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## 10 Minutes With ... Mike Toohey

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Special Contributor To The Waterways Journal

*Mike Toohey was confirmed in early August by the Waterways Council Inc. (WCI) board of directors to become its next president and chief executive officer. He replaces Cornell Martin, who resigned after several years of service. Waterways Council Inc. is the national public policy organization advocating a modern and well-maintained national system of ports and inland waterways. The group is supported by more than 250 waterways carriers, shippers, port authorities, shipping associations and waterways advocacy groups from all regions of the country.*

*Toohey graduated from the University of California-Berkeley with a B.S. degree in forestry, then served from 1971-1975 as a officer in the U.S. Army as a staff officer for the chief of Engineers. He then was on the professional staff of the House Committee on Public Works, rising to staff director of the Republican staff on the committee. He also served as Republican staff director for the Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries from 1981-1983.*

*Nominated by President George Bush and confirmed by the U.S. Senate, Toohey was assistant secretary of*

*the U.S. Department of Transportation from May 1992 through January 1993. He also served as vice president, director of government relations, associate director of government relations, and senior Washington representative for Ashland Inc. from 1998 through 2007. Most recently, Toohey was a consultant for The Livingston Group from 2007 to 2011, providing legislative representation before Congress and the executive branch for clients from the chemical and transportation sectors.*

**WJ:** *Describe your growing-up years. Did you have a mentor or two in your formative years? What strong interests did you have growing up?*

**Toohey:** I was raised in Montana near Yellowstone National Park and later, Northern California. My passion was baseball and I developed a great love of the out-of-doors. My parents were my role models and my other teachers were the Sisters of Notre Dame and the Jesuits from whom I learned respect for fellow beings and a thirst to learn.

**WJ:** *Following your commissioning as an officer, you served as an aide to the chief of Engineers. That would by most be considered a plum assignment for a young army officer. What positive experiences did you have*

*while in that position?*

**Toohey:** This wonderful opportunity placed me amongst the most accomplished military and civilian leaders who accepted me onto their team, placed responsibility upon me far above my expectations and mentored me to achieve. I represented the chief of Engineers on the NASA Skylab missions, where we brought satellite imagery technology to the civil works mission. I also was assigned to then Lt. Col. John Wall (later Lieutenant General) to assist in the effort to apply newly enacted environmental laws such as the National Environmental Protection Act and the Clean Water Act to the civil works programs.

**WJ:** *During the early nineties, you served President George H.W. Bush as assistant secretary of transportation. What were your areas of responsibility and what lessons did you take away when you left about the workings of government?*

**Toohey:** I was responsible for government and intergovernmental affairs, with a consumer affairs group also attached. I worked closely with members of Congress, governors, mayors, other federal agencies and elected officials and citizens of all interests in transpor-

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## Toohy

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tation. The most dramatic moments were certainly the response to Hurricane Andrew devastation of Florida when the U.S. military responded as only they can to mobilize the emergency assistance. My most important takeaway was how highly professional, skilled and absolutely dedicated the career civil servants are at the U.S. Department of Transportation.

**WJ:** *You've been active for much of your career in waterways groups. How much time have you been able to spend around the inland system aboard vessels and visiting facilities?*

**Toohy:** My first exposure to the inland waterways was aboard the mv. Charles Lehman on a trip from Lock 22 on the Upper Mississippi to Cape Girardeau, which occurred during the debate on a second 1,200-foot lock on Lock and Dam 26. When I later embarked upon a 22-year career with Ashland Inc., my responsibilities included representing their petroleum transportation group, which shipped 300,000 barrels per day of products on the inland waterway system. As a result, I have visited many of

the stops along the Ohio, Tennessee, Kanawha, Missouri, Upper Mississippi and Lower Mississippi.

**WJ:** *You had previously served on the board of WCI and held the office of secretary/treasurer from 2003-2005. How were you approached to consider taking the executive leadership post at WCI?*

**Toohy:** WCI established a search committee and they contacted me to ascertain whether I would be interested in being considered for the presidency of the organization. I was honored, interviewed with the committee on two occasions, and here I am!

**WJ:** *What was your biggest concern as you considered moving over to WCI? What did you see as your biggest challenge?*

**Toohy:** My biggest concern and challenge remains the need to accomplish the modernization and efficiency goals of the organization, not just demonstrate activity. We need positive outcomes from Congress, the administration of President Obama and its U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The biggest current challenge is to resolve the financial drain on the Inland Waterways Trust Fund associated with the Olmsted project

so that we can move ahead with the funding of the authorized projects including the Upper Mississippi, and Lower Mon, Kentucky Lock, Industrial Lock and the High Island to Brazos River project, to name just a few of the 24 awaiting funding.

**WJ:** *Do you have a couple of priority goals you'd realistically like to reach within the next two years?*

**Toohy:** My priority goal is the adoption by Congress of the Capital Development Plan, which I testified to before Congress this past week. We have supporters willing to introduce a legislative initiative and seek its adoption in either a title of the surface transportation authorization or as a standalone Water Resources Development Act. We need to mobilize our community of interest to tell Congress to pass this plan!

**WJ:** *How have you found the state of the WCI membership as you begin your new role? Are there good possibilities to expand the membership rolls and base in the year ahead?*

**Toohy:** The membership is active, growing and engaged, for which I am grateful. We obviously need more engaged members and if we perform I be-

lieve then the value of membership will be more obvious and vital.

**WJ:** *As you know through your own activities, there are good number of national and regional associations dealing in some aspect of waterways development and improvement. Are they working together as effectively as they could? How could their collective voices be marshaled to make sure the "waterways message" is heard?*

**Toohy:** That is the challenge—unified advocacy. We need an outcome to rally around and I think Congress is on the cusp of providing that necessary achievement. With the anticipated action on the surface transportation authorization, with a water resources title, the U.S. House of Representatives can provide the catalyst for action that will identify the benefit of unified advocacy.

**WJ:** *Much talk and several proposals have been offered to create a Waterways Development Bank to provide a more secure funding source for waterways projects. How do you see the climate in Washington for accepting a new funding structure, particularly in view of some of the new spending constraints which will impact the federal budget going forward*

and the "cut spending, period" attitude of many new members of Congress?

**Toohy:** The administration has been a proponent of an infrastructure bank as a mechanism to initiate more infrastructure investment. There is a lot of skepticism in Congress over how to capitalize the bank's lending portfolio without borrowing money and adding to the deficit. Until the details emerge on issues such as who would be the responsible authority for repayment of the loans to waterways infrastructure projects, it is hard to see this as viable. We are, however, very grateful to the president for including waterways infrastructure in the mix for his American Jobs Act.

**WJ:** Were a Development Bank to come about, is there room for funding from the federal government, the transportation industry as well as private investment?

**Toohy:** Private sector investment would require a reasonable return on those capital funds. Without a responsible authority to assure repayment, risk is high for default. Congress has resisted contract authority and multi-year appropriations, so how would private capital be attracted to these investments, absent

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**Mike Toohy**  
**Waterways Council Inc.**

ownership or the opportunity upon default of ownership of the projects?

**WJ:** Any structure which attracted private investment, such as we are now seeing in airports and toll roads, implies a return on some level to the private party at interest. Does this imply that the transportation industry is willing to accept a higher level of fees and tolls to allow more critical projects to move ahead?



**Toohy:** The public-private partnership that developed the Capital Development Plan for waterways does recommend a six- to nine-cent increase in the current motor fuels tax to pay a fair share of the costs of implementing the recommended plan. Other beneficiaries' contribution would be recognized through general fund appropriations. We seek to increase the annual investment level from \$170 million per year to \$380 mil-

lion per year for construction and major rehabilitation.

**WJ:** How is your annual Symposium coming up this month in Pittsburgh shaping up?

**Toohy:** Our symposium is attracting a lot of enthusiastic attendance and most of our speakers confirmed early on to attend, which is encouraging.

**WJ:** What interests do you have outside the office?

**Toohy:** My family is my interest. We have one son serving overseas in the Middle East and one at college, but two are in the area. Golf is a family activity along with skiing.

**WJ:** Where did you go on your last vacation? Where are you going on your next one?

**Toohy:** We went to the Mariposa Grove at Yosemite National Park, a national treasure established by President Lincoln in the midst of the Civil War at the request of a single member of Congress—one person can make a difference! We hope to have the time for a family ski trip when our son Keith returns from the command of the United States Army 319th EOD (Explosives Ordinance Demolition) Group, CENTCOM.