

# Q&A: Cornel Martin, president and CEO of the Waterways Council Inc.

**INTERVIEWED BY  
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**WorkBoat:** *How has your experience prepared you for your new job?*

**Cornel Martin:** I grew up in this industry in South Louisiana in a Cajun family with strong ties to the water. It was a way of life. I attended Nicholls State University (in Thibodaux, La.), and in my sophomore year was elected president of the student body. This led to a meeting with Billy Tauzin who was in the state Legislature and running for Congress. When Billy was elected to Congress, he invited me to Washington to do an internship. This led to a full time job as his legislative assistant for maritime affairs, and then I became a senior professional staffer on the House Coast Guard subcommittee. This gave me experience on maritime legislation. Then I worked four years for the American Waterways Operators and was approached by the **Delta Queen Steamboat Co.** to become their government affairs person. As vice president for Delta Queen, I was trying to revitalize the U.S. passenger vessel industry. But then 9/11 hit and Delta Queen went into bankruptcy. I went to work for the company that took over, again doing government and community relations work for the successor of Delta Queen for 11 years. That job gave me a better appreciation for the locks and dam system, as the DQ boats run up to Pittsburgh and St. Paul. I stayed active in legislative issues as chairman of the Passenger Vessel Association's legislative committee. Now I'm very



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happy to come back to Washington. I have learned the ups and downs of the industry, I know the legislative process, and I know how to keep a small business going on the waterway.

**WB:** *What are your priorities?*

**Martin:** Clearly the biggest priority is trying to secure funding for

upgrades to our locks and dams, and also fix the Corps delivery process of these restoration projects. Fixing the delivery system and the funding are critical because until these are resolved, I can't envision a lot of progress on modernization and new construction of locks and dams. When you look at the projects approved in the 1986 WRDA bill, it took an average of 6.2 years to complete a project, and it was done within 30 percent of the original budget. Any project authorized since then has gone completely off the boards, taking up to 17 years to finish. The Olmsted Lock and Dam project, for example, was authorized for \$775 million and was to take seven years to build. We've already spent \$1 billion and will need another \$1.5 billion to finish it. What was to be seven years is now expected to take 26 years to complete. I will work with the Corps and the Inland Waterways User Board to figure out how to fix this.

**WB:** *What changes do you expect from the new administration?*

**Martin:** The change in administration will have a positive impact on our industry and the waterways. By the statements made during the campaign by Mr. Obama, and by the

statements made by Congress about making infrastructure improvements part of a stimulus bill, I think we'll see a new focus on infrastructure. An infusion of funds from a stimulus bill could help speed up projects that are now taking 10 years or more to build. It's important that we're seated at the table with the new administration when there are discussions on infrastructure. With Sen. Obama being from Illinois, he understands the positive impact of waterways on the nation and how deterioration of locks and dams along the upper Mississippi have hurt farmers in the Midwest. He voted for the recently passed WRDA bill and supports funding for modernizing the Mississippi and Illinois River system locks and dams.

**WB:** *How do you think the current economic downturn will affect shipments along the waterways?*

**Martin:** On the surface, you might think that a national economic slowdown would slow movement of commodities on the waterways. But this situation might actually have a positive impact. As shippers look for more cost-efficient ways to move their goods, hopefully they will look more at barging. If shippers turn more to the waterways, it could help us offset any negative effects of a sluggish economy.

**WB:** *What changes might you see in the future for funding the nation's waterways infrastructure?*

**Martin:** We would like to see a shift in the cost-sharing ratio that is now used to fund the Inland Waterways Trust Fund. Right now, it is financed 50-50, with the industry's contribution coming through a diesel tax on fuel. We'd like to see a 75 percent contribution from the federal government, and a 25 percent contribution from industry, with the government paying for the other beneficiaries. **WB**