

Changes Lie Ahead, But Inland Waterways' Value to the Nation Remains The Same

By Cornel Martin, President/CEO, Waterways Council, Inc.

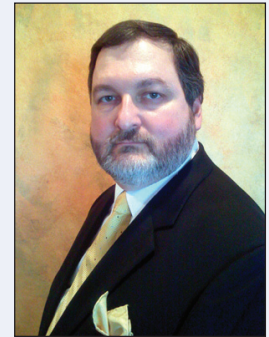
As we roll over another year on the calendar, I enter my first year as the new President and CEO of Waterways Council, Inc., being elected to this position by the WCI Board in late October 2008. I succeed R. Barry Palmer in his five years as WCI's leader, knowing I have large shoes to fill with many challenges ahead.

While each new year brings promise and change, 2009 will particularly be interesting as the nation prepares for a new President and Administration. What lies ahead under President Obama is largely unknown, but we do know that investment in national transportation infrastructure is essential. According to an Obama Campaign fact sheet on transportation Mr. "Obama believes that it is critically important for the United States to rebuild its national transportation infrastructure - its highways, bridges, roads, ports, air, and train systems - to strengthen user safety, bolster our long-term competitiveness and ensure our economy continues to grow."

Waterways Council also believes that investment in our nation's inland navigation systems of locks and dams is critical to economic recovery and to sustain future economic stability and growth and should be included in any effort to stimulate the economy.

Just a few facts to characterize the importance of the inland industry to move our nation's goods: More than 625 million tons of freight commodities valued at more than \$70 billion move on America's inland navigation system each year. This commercial traffic includes building

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block commodities such as grain for domestic and international markets, coal, steel to domestic and international locations, petroleum products to distributors, feedstocks to chemical plants, and aggregate materials for construction use.

Our waterways system transports about 20% of the nation's coal burned to generate electricity in utility plants and around 22% of domestic petroleum products. The inland waterways system is the primary artery for more than half of grain and oilseed exports.

And with trade expected to double over the next decade and with our highways and railways facing serious capacity issues, the waterways will be key to moving these products for domestic consumption and for export.

The waterways help improve our quality of life as well. According to a new study by the National Waterways Foundation (See article, page 20) inland waterways relieve congestion on our already over-crowded highways

and railways that run through cities. One jumbo barge has the same capacity as 70 trucks or 16 rail cars. A typical 15-barge tow on our nation's rivers is equal to 1,050 trucks in just one barge movement! With this capacity, this transportation mode helps to protect our environment and our air quality as well.

And while it took a relatively short two to three years to build some of the first locks and dams on our nation's rivers in the 1920s and 1930s, today it takes increasingly longer periods of time to bring new locks online. Another key priority for Waterways Council in 2009 and beyond will be to find a way to improve upon the current project delivery system and ensure that navigation projects supported by Inland Waterway Trust Fund expenditures are being built in a timely and cost-effective manner.

The need for improvement in the process is keenly evident when comparing the current projects with lock

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and dam modernization projects authorized a little more than 20 years ago during the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) of 1986. Construction for all seven of the WRDA '86 lock and dam modernization projects proceeded at a pace that saw the new/modernized locks become operational in a reasonable amount of time, ranging from four to eight years, with the average for all seven projects equaling 6.3 years.

The estimated time required to complete lock and dam modernization projects since that time has ballooned far beyond a reasonable time and costs have soared; only one post-WRDA '86 project thus far has seen its modernized lock become operational (Marmet near Charleston, West Virginia). The Olmsted Lock and Dam project on the Ohio River, originally projected to be completed three years ago at a cost of \$774 million is

now not expected to be finished, at best, until 2015, a 24-year+ construction period and at a price that could exceed \$2.4 billion. Almost as disappointing, the Lower Mon project on the Monongahela River near Pittsburgh already has been under construction for 13 years and the Corps' current estimates indicate that it will not be complete, at best, for another eight years - around 2022 - with cost over-runs pushing original estimated costs from \$550 million to new estimates exceeding \$1.3 billion.

This is a problem for commercial users of the system who need efficient and reliable ways to move the nation's commodities but also for every taxpaying citizen who cares about how government should perform on its behalf.

Waterways Council's members will be working with the Corps of Engineers and others to ascertain

how improvements can be made to this project delivery system so that the more than \$7 billion in transportation cost-savings can be returned to American taxpayers at a time when we face an uncertain economic future.

Our citizens have been blessed with ingenuity, perseverance and God given talent to solve the most significant national difficulties, and we must find a solution to this perplexing situation. America's inland navigation system offers our country an opportunity to compete in the world market, but this more than 50-year-old system now requires modernization and care. If we don't make the necessary investment now, our future as a world leader could be jeopardized. That cost would clearly be greater than the relatively small investment needed to modernize our inland waterways transportation system. ■

Protecting the Environment

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Another is potential liability - not a small matter, as most recently evidenced by the widely publicized spill in the Mississippi River in July.

"It costs money if you spill oil in the water," Wiegman says. "The crew has to know that if they have an accident it's going to cost the company. That's been part of our teaching here forever, but now it's widespread throughout the industry."

Like Shaffer, Wiegman notes that although the school emphasizes prevention, students also learn in great detail how to respond in case of an incident. He, too, sees an encouraging pattern in the students' focus on the environment, whether they are enrolled in the entry-level program or returning to campus for vocational upgrading.

"The trainees who are first exposed to it are fully developed in learning all the things about protecting themselves," states Wiegman, a U.S. Navy veteran. "After they've learned about environmental laws and regulations, along with personal protective equipment and its use, you might

think they wouldn't retain it. But, in the merchant marine we have to renew basic fire fighting every five years and we have to renew first aid and CPR training every two years. There are constant safety reminders aboard ship, both in writing and in the form of drills. As you get out on the ships, you realize you never stop learning about being safe and doing the right thing."



Oil containment exercises.

He concludes, "If you develop a safety culture, it starts with the entry-level person but it never stops. That's what we try to do at the Paul Hall Center - develop a culture of safety and awareness with everyone, regardless of what type of ship they're on. We always need to be safe." ■

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