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Down by the rivers

Congress needs to back lock and dam upgrades

Pittsburgh owes its historical existence to its rivers, but the city should never forget that the waterways are not just geographical features that offer fine recreation and pleasing vistas. From colonial times to the present, they have never ceased being commercial highways. A reminder comes with every passing towboat and its barges.

At least Pittsburghers who can see the river traffic have some inkling that they live in the second-largest inland port in the country in terms of tonnage (it had been the largest until three states banded together a few years ago to create a bigger entity). But for others away from busy rivers, especially in Washington, D.C., the economic advantages of waterborne transportation are too easily overlooked.

Fortunately, those who hold the public purse strings have lately shown signs of understanding the stakes. More than 625 million tons of freight move on inland waterways annually, including 20 percent of the nation's coal and more than 60 percent of its grain exports. Barges offer transportation that is often cheaper and safer than road or rail and, unlike those modes, is still underutilized. Given that one jumbo barge has the same capacity as roughly 60 trucks, the environmental benefits of using the rivers as roads is obvious.

While the rivers themselves are the gifts of nature, they need enlightened government officials who see the need to build and maintain infrastructure that keeps the waterways navigable. Many of the nation's lock chambers are beyond their 50-year design lives; some are older. Construction of the Emsworth Dam, which requires urgent repairs, was finished in 1922 on the Ohio River. Farther downstream at

Edgeworth, the Dashields Dam dates from 1929.

Waterways Council Inc., the national public policy organization that supports the industry, finds encouragement in recent actions of the Bush administration and Congress. For example, the Inland Waterways Trust Fund, which is supported by the fees of towboat operators, shippers and other commercial users, wasn't being tapped for necessary construction and rehabilitation of locks and dams and grew to more than \$400 million over a decade. That trend has been reversed and the money is being spent on priority projects.

According to the council and its allies, part of the credit for the better attitude toward modernization must go to leaders of the Army Corps of Engineers in Pittsburgh and Cincinnati for having set up a priority list of projects that reflects real needs instead of political considerations.

The Bush administration has submitted a budget for fiscal year 2008 that includes major funding for the modernization of locks and dams. Locally, some \$43 million has been requested for the Emsworth Dam and \$70.3 million for Locks and Dams 2, 3 and 4 on the Monongahela River at Braddock, Elizabeth and Charleroi. That money will be sufficient for the task, although the Waterways Council would like to see an additional \$4.2 million spent at Emsworth, Dashields and the Montgomery locks in Beaver County for study of a long-range plan that would go beyond immediate needs.

This is a good story that can still be spoiled by a bad ending. Congress needs to pass a long-delayed authorization bill of water resource projects and make sure that the president's budget isn't whittled down.