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Rivers of money? There's not enough to fix all locks and dams

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Pittsburgh owes its existence to the presence of its three rivers, and two-and-a-half centuries after its founding the rivers are still vital to the region's prosperity. To that end, there was good news this week for the nation's second-largest inland port.

The Army Corps of Engineers has secured a lion's share of federal funding for local projects under the \$410 billion spending bill just passed by Congress and signed by President Barack Obama. Of the federal funds slated for the nine-county region, the corps will receive approximately \$95 million for locks and dams (\$53 million for maintenance and operations and \$42 million for construction) for fiscal year 2009.

Good news, yes, but not yet great news.

Certainly, the money is urgently needed -- \$25.8 million for emergency repairs to two dams at Emsworth; \$4 million for a belated study of the long-term needs for the dams at Emsworth, Dashields and Montgomery; and \$15.9 million for the Lower Monongahela River Improvement Project at Locks and Dams 2, 3 and 4 at Braddock, Elizabeth and Charleroi.

But as Rep. Jason Altmire, D-McCandless, so aptly noted, this money is a fraction of what is needed. For example, the project for the Lower Monongahela was originally scheduled to be completed in 2004, as James McCarville, executive director of the Port of Pittsburgh Commission, points out, and the funding for this project now is actually smaller than in recent years.

Moreover, the needs of the region's locks and dams go way beyond what has been budgeted. In December, the commission released a stimulus-package wish

list that identified \$580 million in shovel-ready work. It will take stimulus spending -- separate from this budget bill -- to turn this good news into great news. The details of that will be announced shortly.

The region's congressional delegation -- in addition to Mr. Altmire, Reps. Mike Doyle, D-Swissvale; Tim Murphy, R-Upper St. Clair; and John Murtha, D-Johnstown, backed by Sens. Arlen Specter, a Republican, and Bob Casey, a Democrat -- have done a good job championing this cause. Investments in waterway infrastructure are not frivolous; they are essential.

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