

Chattanooga Times Free Press

# CHATTANOOGA FREE PRESS

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## EDITORIALS

### Washington and our waterways

One day when he wasn't mythically chopping down cherry trees, courageously leading a ragtag American Revolution army or presiding over the writing of the marvelous Constitution of the United States, President George Washington looked at a map of the United States and noted the importance of the river waterways in our embryonic country and the yet-to-be developed territories.

Since many states and beyond were involved, he rightly declared the waterways a federal responsibility. That, of course, was long before Interstate highways were dreamed of, or railroads were developed, or airplanes were invented. The rivers, with future connecting canals, locks and dams, were vital to our nation.

Today there are about 11,000 miles of waterways from Pennsylvania and Minnesota through the Tennessee Valley to New Orleans. They not only provide water, electricity generation and recreation but also massive transportation that is essential to thousands of jobs and services to our people in our economy.

It's important, therefore, to keep our waterways up to date. We are particularly concerned about that because of the deteriorating lock at Chickamauga Dam. It's a federal responsibility. Early stages of replacement planning are creeping along as deteriorating concrete threatens to close the lock and block the Tennessee River

here within a decade.

The Chickamauga Lock and other needed waterway projects cost big money. Who pays? General taxpayers, of course. But there is also a 20 cents per gallon diesel fuel tax that barge operators pay into a "trust fund" (similar to the fuel taxes that go into highway and airport trust funds), which is dedicated to waterway maintenance. But much of it is not being used promptly.

Representatives of Waterways Work!, a trade organization, and Ingram Barge Co., a major carrier on our rivers, were in Chattanooga this week to urge release of much of the \$400 million that has accumulated in the waterways trust fund, so needed work — such as replacing the Chickamauga Lock — can be speeded.

Why not? As Congress votes far too much spending (about three-fourths for unconstitutional things), the money retained in trust funds is used as a book-keeping trick to offset — and thereby appear to reduce — huge federal deficits and debt.

There is much government spending that should be cut. But when user taxes are paid for specific and needed public purposes, they should be put to work.

One jumbo barge can carry as much as 58 trucks or 15 railroad cars. Do you want a lack of waterways upkeep to block barges and force the dumping of countless more trucks onto our highways?