

WATERWAYS

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Around the country

Groups looking beyond WRDA to funding

Many of the stories about the 79 to 14 U.S. Senate vote to override President George Bush's WRDA veto carry headlines that begin "WRDA could mean..." There have also been many stories about agriculture groups and others who see the strong override vote in both the Senate and House as long overdue and much needed. However, as UMWA Executive Director Russ Eichman points out in his column in this newsletter, WRDA 2007 is an authorization bill and still must be funded.

Hope abounds

The same groups applauding WRDA see the Senate vote and a 361 to 54 House override vote as a good sign that there is the political will to fund the many and much needed infrastructure and environmental projects in the bill. For example, when she talked with the Clinton, Iowa, *Herald* recently, New York Senator and presidential candidate Hillary Clinton came out strongly for funding.

During a campaign stop at Lock and Dam 13, Sen. Clinton said, "We have so much undone business when it comes to our infrastructure... We've got to get about fixing up our country and this is a piece of this. I've laid out a program I call 'Rebuild America' and it aims at putting a lot more money into infrastructure because we are seeing the deterioration of our streets, of our bridges, of our tunnels, of locks and dams, of ports, you

name it. And we can't remain a strong economy if we don't make those investments."

One project starts

Construction has started on an important project that is not in the WRDA bill. As crews began boring large holes for concrete bridge supports on the new 35-W bridge, the Twin Cities media began doing stories about how local residents feel about the noise that will accompany 20-hour construction days.

Most residents seem to realize that it's not possible to bake a cake without breaking a few eggs. When asked by reporters how they'll deal with the noise, many say that it's already a noisy

area and say they want the bridge back as quickly as possible.

Pile driving has begun on the south side of the river and will be limited to between 7 a.m. and 5:30 p.m. The chief contractor hopes to have the 35W bridge done and open to traffic by the end of 2008.

People important too

While infrastructure is vital, UMWA has also noted that people resources are vital. The organization has written to the Commander of the Eight Coast Guard District expressing concern over movement of an important billet, or position, down river. Specifically, UMWA

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CHS Inc., recently played host to a crew from NHK, the Japanese television network. Senior Correspondent Hirotaka Toyonaga and his crew visited the facility in early Nov.

Executive Director's Report...

President George Bush vetoed WRDA 2007 because it was "far in excess of what the American taxpayer can afford". Now that the veto has been overridden, the larger discussion of how to finance infrastructure will begin, because the legislation only provides authority for projects, it provides no money. And since money, as some profess, is merely a measure of political will and/or opposition, never of need, federal funds may be a long time in coming, despite continued and intensive lobbying by commercial waterway interests.

'Get the job done'

Early last month, at a University of Minnesota-sponsored Transportation Forum, Congressman Jim Oberstar, always a strong supporter of infrastructure, but now Chair of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, making no bones about where he comes down on the issue, declared that this Congress "...will get the job done!" In truth, I understood this statement addressed the generic issue of infrastructure, but since Oberstar also spoke strongly to the need for improvements to lock and dam structures on the Mississippi and Illinois rivers, I assume his determination extended to WRDA as well. Let's hope so.

Finding solutions to public funding of infrastructure projects is a never-ending quest. It was announced that this year's November annual meeting of NWC would include a presentation on more effective ways to finance project that are currently funded by the Inland Waterways Trust Fund. And recent programs by the Institute for Water Resources explored alternatives that include a transparent way to analyze public investment decisions - a popular target of COE detractors.

On the previously mentioned Transportation Forum dais with Mr. Oberstar was Tim Martin, former Secretary of Illinois DOT, a strong supporter of public-private partnerships, who frankly said "We have to get money where we find it", referring to Chicago's 2005

sale of the federally built Chicago Skyway to a Spanish-Australian consortium for \$1.8 billion. That foreign group has a 99-year lease with responsibility for all operating and maintenance costs in exchange for all tolls and concession revenues. As we stated in this column last July, that group also purchased the Indiana toll road for \$3.85 billion under a similar arrangement.

Other deals

Those sales are only part of the 20-some transactions around the country in which public infrastructure has been sold to private organizations and about a dozen more currently under negotiation could fetch state governments another \$80 billion, this according to an August *Wall Street Journal* article.

But these deals are not limited to existing structures; they are used more and more to fund new construction as well.

Detractors still abound, however. It was reported that politicians from both parties in New Jersey fought against a recent study recommending the state lease some toll roads claiming the deal would shortchange taxpayers. That same report reminded readers that New Jersey has the most bloated and costly government in the nation and the worst roads as well. Yet state leaders worried that the proposed auction, which could have raised some \$20 billion for that fiscally-challenged state would have "...allowed private operators to take advantage of its citizens." Cynics say it also would have eliminated using the state's public transportation authority as a job-patronage mill.

New thinking needed

We already have the expertise to build and pave roads, lay railroad tracks and tame rivers. It appears that today's transportation challenges brought about by burgeoning populations, limited natural resources, globalization and environmental concerns may require a more willing acceptance of alternatives including private projects. After all, if something goes bad, we could always 'nationalize' a private toll road.

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learned that the job in question is filled by a Chief Warrant Officer (CWO). As any old military person knows, a Warrant Officer is usually an outstanding person who has moved from the enlisted to officer ranks and the loss of a CWO billet often means the loss of a seasoned, knowledgeable veteran.

In part the letter to the commandant said that the territory and tasks assigned to the St. Paul Detachment stretch the current staff to the limit. Recent events, such as the 35W bridge collapse, have demonstrated how critical it is to have an adequately staffed safety office on the upper river that is able to respond quickly.

UMWA also noted, "The 2008 Republican National Convention in St. Paul will put additional demands on safety and security personnel at all levels of government. Securing the Mississippi River alongside the host city of more than 300,000 people promises to be a challenging assignment, even for the Coast Guard. For that reason alone, loss of a St. Paul billet(s) seems inopportune at this time."

Consolidation on track

The UMWA/RRA consolidation committee is on track to meet the Jan. 1, 2008, target date for consolidation.

Now that WRDA has become law, members say the time is right for the move.

At the Sept., Annual meeting, UMWA members and directors moved, "that the members instruct the directors to enter into negotiations with the River Resource Alliance for a consolidation of the two organizations on terms consistent with the Guidelines for Consolidation."

The new organization will be called the Upper Mississippi Waterway Association because of the historic significance of the name, but the 2008 vice president of the organization will come from the ranks of RRA.