

Waterways

A publication of the Upper Mississippi Waterway Association

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With merger pending...

UMWA holds 83rd annual mtg

When Directors and Members of the Executive Committee gather at Southview Country Club in West St. Paul this week for the 83rd annual meeting of the Upper Mississippi Waterway Association they will likely make some history. One major item on the agenda is approval of a merger with the River Resource Alliance (RRA). The proposed merger has been unofficially agreed to by both organizations.

Infrastructure advocate

RRA, which had been affiliated with the Midwest Area River Coalition 2000 (MARC2000), was formed in the early 1990s to advocate for lock modernization and infrastructure renewal on the Upper Mississippi River System. MARC2000 merged with the Waterways Council in 2006.

If RRA board members approve the merger on the 16th and UMWA follows on the 17th, a notice of merger will be filed with the Minnesota Attorney General and Articles of Merger will be filed in December with the Secretary of State's office.

More focused effort

The merger has been talked about for some time, because the two groups had many members in common and it was felt that resources will be more effectively focused in one organization.

Waterways will have more details on the merger and parties involved in future issues. Under the merger

plan, UMWA will be the surviving corporation and the first board of directors will consist of the current members of the Boards of both RRA and UMWA. The Plan of Merger says that members of both Executive Committees will constitute the membership of the UMWA Executive Committee for one year from the date of merger (Oct 1.). Officers in the future will be Chairman of the Board; President, Vice President; Secretary and Treasurer.

UMWA continues work

As it has been since it was incorporated in 1932, The Upper Mississippi Waterway Association (UMWA) is an association of waterway operators, shippers and other waterway interests working together to promote the economic and environmental benefits of water transportation in the Upper Midwest. The organization will continue to work to ensure that the Upper Mississippi River navigation system is used and maintained in a safe and environmentally responsible manner. Members also frequently point out the environmental benefits of waterborne transportation due to its fuel efficiency.

Meeting at 5:30 p.m.

The Membership and Board of Directors meeting will be held at 5:30 p.m. in the President's Room of Southview Country Club, with reception and dinner to follow. (And of course, there will be the always popular door prizes after dinner.) *Waterways* will have a full report on the meeting in our October issue.

From the Executive Director...

A Tale of Two Bridges

The Rock Island Bridge in St. Paul, MN may not be the first bridge to span the Mississippi River, but it arguably has a remarkable past and continues to baffle the Minnesota Legislature some 114 years after its construction.

Honors, however, for the first railroad to span the Mississippi also goes to the Rock Island Railroad, which, in 1853 started a three-year project to construct a bridge that would connect Illinois with Iowa, using as a stepping stone, an island called Rock Island.

First Bridge across Mississippi Seen as Threat

It was this first Mississippi River bridge that brought into focus the conflict between riverboat owners, who saw the bridge as an impediment to slow, and cheap water transportation, and other commercial interests who saw the need for rapid, but more expensive rail transportation. According to reports of the day, this larger issue pitted people of St. Louis and other river interests who favored free navigation for boats, against groups in Chicago and railroad interests who supported the right of railroad companies to build a bridge.

Legal Considerations

According to “Bridging the Mississippi: Railroads and Steamboats Clash At the Rock Island Bridge”, by David A. Pfeiffer, two years of wrangling including an injunction in federal court to restrain the railroad from further construction finally brought a solution. An 1855 ruling by the U.S. Circuit Court for Northern Illinois concluded that “the State of Illinois has an undoubted right to authorize the construction of a bridge, provided that the same does not materially obstruct the free navigation of the river.” The Court stated further that there would be little or no delay or hazard to steamboats resulting from passing the drawbridge in question.

Ironically, just fifteen days after the official completion of the bridge, part of it was wrecked and burned as a result of a still-disputed steamboat collision. Another two years of suits and counter suits followed. Finally on December 30, 1867 the Supreme Court upheld lower court decisions and the bridge was

allowed to remain. As such, the Rock Island Bridge contributed mightily to the westward settlement of the nation and to “the removal of the Mississippi River as a barrier to American railroads.”

St. Paul’s Swing Bridge

Getting back to the Rock Island Swing Bridge in St. Paul; unlike its ante-bellum counterpart downstream, this Minnesota bridge first opened in post-civil war 1895, was rebuilt in 1970 and went into receivership in 1980. It was subsequently purchased and operated as a toll-road by a private firm until a 1999 inspection revealed that it was no longer safe for vehicle traffic, at which time it was closed. Ownership then reverted to Washington County due to tax default. At this point, though closed and largely ignored, the entire bridge structure remained intact.

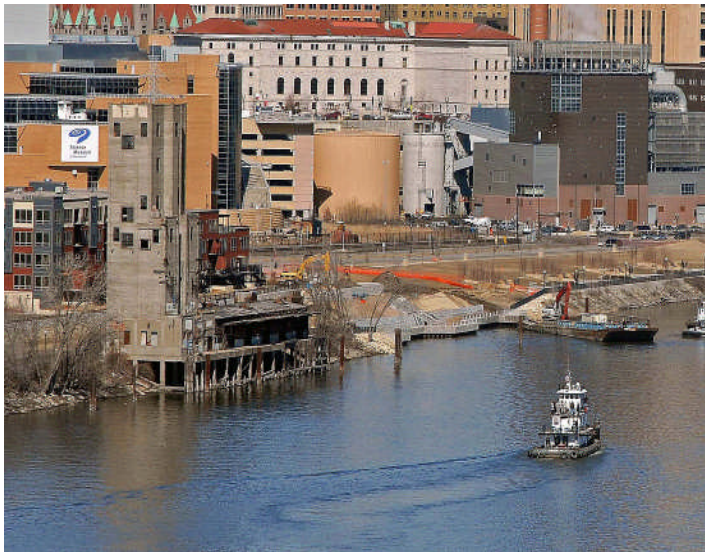
In fall 2008, the National Park Service hosted an open house to gauge recreational interest in the now-closed bridge. The overwhelming response to this event gave the Park Service hope that at least a portion of the bridge could be used as a recreational attraction. UMWA supported recreational use of the off-channel western portions of the structure.

Several weeks later a 200-foot section of the bridge on the east side collapsed into the floodplain. The collapse, according to several sources, emphasizes how badly the bridge had deteriorated, thus possibly scuttling the possibility of recreational use.

Then, in early 2009, major work was authorized to remove the eastern approach, the swing span and the western-most bridge span, leaving two off-channel spans in place along with 3 concrete river channel piers that once supported the eastern approach and the swing span over the navigation channel.

To further complicate the seemingly simple process of removing three piers that pose a serious threat to water commerce, the Minnesota Legislature imposed a two-year moratorium against further demolition including the removal of the threatening piers.

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Above: Mv. Itasca passes St. Paul's City House during the early stages of its renovation. The Science Museum of Minnesota's towboat Charles E is visible just to the left of the top story of City House.

'City House' open for visitors

Since its opening last month, St. Paul's City House has become a popular addition to the city's park system. Once known as Number 1 House, the old Grain Terminal Association headhouse and sackhouse on the left descending bank of the Mississippi River in St. Paul have been renovated into a park pavilion and event venue that helps acquaint visitors with the history and beauty of the river.

In the sack house, large glass doors are open to the river and a brick veranda outside where sacks of grain were once wheeled about and loaded and unloaded. Many visitors stop in while biking or hiking the trails along Shepard Road in St. Paul.

The old facility is now on the National Register of Historic Places and can hold up to 275 guests. Because it is within park boundaries, the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area (MNRRA) has a lot of information available about City House including an excellent article by Historian John Anfinson available at <http://www.nps.gov/miss>. And check out www.stpaul.gov for information on hours and renting City House.

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Civil War Question Still Relevant

Unlike the Civil War question of whether a new river bridge would aggravate the free flow of river commerce, the issue with the St. Paul location is how to remove now-unused bridge piers that are clearly a hazard to commercial navigation.

Aided by general misunderstanding and misuse of terms, continues to confuse this issue. The Minnesota Legislature thinks the two-year moratorium signed by the Governor applies only to the west side of the bridge. On the other hand, engineers of the counties on both sides of the river maintain the moratorium language, rightly or wrongly, includes a restriction against the further elimination of any portion of the structure. This includes the three obstructive piers in question.

Further, the bridge is not really a 'bridge', as trusses that once carried railroad tracks across the navigable portion of the river have been removed, leaving only obstructive piers in the navigation channel, along with two connected, yet isolated side channel spans on the west side. Some claim that Mn/DOT has authority over piers in the river. However since the piers in question pose a hazard to navigation the COE may, if necessary, be obligated to finance their removal.

The frustrating part of this entire enterprise is the perplexing number of local, state and federal agencies staking regulatory claim over this issue, without taking the commensurate responsibility to remove that which "materially obstructs the free navigation of the river."

We are indebted to John Weeks for material in this month's column. For additional bridge information see <http://www.johnweeks.com>

Editor's note: We'd like to correct an error in the August 2009 edition of *Waterways*. We erroneously reported the annual Congressional salary at \$217,400. The annual salary of Senators and Representatives is \$174,000.