

WestLinn Tidings

Cash locked in

The Willamette Falls Locks receive stimulus money to continue repairs

BY KARA HANSEN

The West Linn Tidings, May 7, 2009

The Willamette Falls Locks could reopen as soon as May 2010 thanks to \$1.8 million in federal stimulus money awarded to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The lock and gate system, a river elevator of sorts, is the only way boats and barges can navigate past the 42-foot drop of the falls that lie between West Linn and Oregon City. The locks closed last winter because of a lack of funding to complete a required periodic inspection and repairs.

Now, the work will begin as soon as a contract is awarded, said Diana Fredlund, spokeswoman for the Corps of Engineers Portland district. The locks could then reopen next May for the spring-summer boating season, provided the Corps secures money to operate them.

“We are very pleased to be able to get the inspection done this year,” Fredlund said. “We know how important the locks are to the community. As such, we’re doing all we can to get them back in working order.”

Unfortunately, the construction activity will likely preclude this year’s Lock Fest, the annual event drawing attention to the locks’ significance and financial plight, said Sandy Carter, executive director of the Willamette Falls Heritage Foundation.

“But I think we can predict and look forward to a big ‘grand opening’ in the spring of 2010, with much celebration and lots of boats to mark the beginning of the big ‘turn around’ for river tourism and renewed barging,” she said.

Meanwhile, the Clackamas County Tourism and Cultural Affairs Department, directed by West Linn’s Linda Bell, has hired a consultant to help update the locks’ listing on the National Register of Historic Places and nominate them for national historic landmark status, Carter said, “which will make them a destination attraction and further stimulate recreational tours through them during the visitor season.”

“It’s all coming together,” she wrote in an e-mail. “It’s just taking a lot of patience, lots of strong local and regional partnerships and a clear focus on the vision of a restored and vital navigation canal and locks.”

The 136-year-old locks system is believed to be the oldest continuously operating of its kind in the United States. A private company opened the locks in 1873, and the Corps bought them in 1915.

Carter said it’s possible they could change hands again if the Corps doesn’t allocate enough money in its budget to operate them.

A group representing public and private interests dedicated to reopening the locks has “a solid plan for eventual transfer of ownership of the canal,” she said.



Onlookers watch boats go through the Willamette Falls Locks during the 2007 Lock Fest. The locks recently received federal stimulus money to finish repairs.
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