



The Oregonian

Locks deserve much more than a trickle

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It's January, and that sound you hear is the annual cry over Congress' apparent belief that the Willamette River should be cut in two.

Once again, federal lawmakers have shortchanged the Willamette Falls Locks, giving the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers just enough to serve as caretakers for the 133-year-old engineering marvel at West Linn. And once again, engineers will have to work magic to keep the leaking wooden gates, deteriorating concrete walls and cranky hydraulic equipment working.

This is a high-stakes crapshoot. If anything happens to the locks, there would be no way to navigate around Willamette Falls, a 40-foot drop. And that would divide the Willamette into upper and lower reaches.

The Corps of Engineers announced Tuesday that the 2006 Energy and Water Appropriations Bill earmarks just \$65,000 for the locks' operation and maintenance. This is just enough to operate the locks on an abbreviated schedule during the warm-weather months, by advance appointment. In other words, if you want to take your boat through, you have to call ahead of time so the Corps can have someone there to let you pass.

The budget squeeze has been getting increasingly tighter. The 2002 budget allotted \$344,000, followed by \$292,000, \$213,000 and \$184,000 in following years.

The money picture would have been even worse if not for the efforts of Rep. Darlene Hooley, D-Ore. Hooley, a former West Linn city councilor, has worked every year to insert a "Congressional add-on" into the appropriations bill.

It's true that the locks no longer handle the staggering commercial tonnage they once did. They no longer see an endless parade of tug-and-barge combos hauling gravel, grain and produce from the mines and farm country to the markets downriver. Even the paper mills hugging both sides of the falls have switched to using trucks to transport supplies and finished products.

Unfortunately, however, Congress still measures the value of public engineering projects by those old-fashioned tonnage counts, completely ignoring the contributions to Oregon's economy made by tourism excursions, dinner cruises, angling and recreational boating.

That would be something like giving money only to roads that carry log trucks from the woods to lumber mills.

That might have made sense in 1906. But the Northwest has changed a lot in the last century.

While Congress keeps the locks in financial limbo, Gov. Ted Kulongoski is looking for long-term financial stability. Kulongoski has approved the locks for study by Oregon Solutions, which grew out of the Oregon Sustainability Act of 2001.

Vern Duncan, former state education superintendent and state senator, is leading a group of interested people -- including Hooley's staff -- in a search for money and answers. The group encompasses 16 diverse commercial and governmental interests along the river, from Salem to Portland.

I can only wish them every success. I know it would make no sense to throw a ton of money at the locks these days. But letting them rust into oblivion would be a disservice to everyone in the lower Willamette Valley.

Congrats to members of the Tryon Life Community Farm, who raised more than \$1.5 million to purchase land near Tryon Creek State Natural Area. That means the land won't be sold for up-market residential development and they can continue their farm-in-the-city demonstration project. I'm sure the farm will serve the region a whole lot better than another cluster of McMansions most of us can't afford.

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