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BIG HELP Opening of Olmsted arriving just in time

By JIM PAXTON Jul 28, 2018

News that the Olmsted Locks and Dam will be operational in October and completed in 2022 is welcome on many fronts.

The new Ohio river facility includes two 110-by-1200-foot locks that will significantly speed barge traffic through that portion of the river. The larger locks mean less breaking up of towboat cargos. The fact there are two adds to the efficiencies.

If there is any melancholy about this news it may be that it means a project that has been a significant employer in the region for 25 years is winding down. But for the local maritime industry the announcement comes in the nick of time.

The Olmsted facility replaces antiquated Lock and Dam 52 near Brookport and Lock and Dam 53 further up the river toward Cairo. Those facilities date to 1928 and 1929 respectively. Lock and Dam 52 has been a particular problem for the river industry in recent months. Its wooden wicker dam, which can be lowered below the surface when there is enough river depth for towboats to safely pass, is pretty much held together with baling wire these days.

Deterioration of Dam 52 requiring emergency repairs created major problems on the Ohio a couple of times last year, including an eight-day closure to commercial traffic last September. An executive of one major river transport firm told the Sun this week that some shippers are avoiding Dam 52 entirely because of concerns about reliability and safety.

Work on the Olmsted replacement was authorized in 1988. As often happens with federal projects, ground was not broken until 1993. Estimates at the time were that the project would be completed in 10 years at a cost of \$775 million.

Federal projects are notorious for coming in late and over budget, but Olmsted would prove an outlier even in that regard. Part of the reason is that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers decided to use it as something of a laboratory, trying methods and technologies that had never been employed before.

This produced delays and setbacks, although we doubt anyone involved anticipated the scale. Only recently the Corps of Engineers had projected Olmsted's locks would not be ready until 2022 with completion of the overall project coming in 2026. The project price tag ballooned to an estimated \$3.1 billion.

But at a media tour of the new facility this week corps officials explained that adequate funding and reevaluation of some aspects of the project have changed that picture for the better. The locks are now weeks from being operational and the new 2022 project completion date comes with an estimated \$325 million reduction in the final price tag. Hats off the Corps of Engineers for making it happen, after what has been a long and difficult road.

More than \$10 billion in commerce moves through the affected stretch of the Ohio annually. The condition of Dam 52 increasingly put that at risk. River industry officials say that in addition to the business impact of closures, the dam itself has become a safety concern.

It is good that the remedy is at hand. The older locks and dams will be decommissioned and removed in the next few years while the new, modern facility provides a significant boost to the efficiency of the inland maritime industry. Our region is grateful to finally see this asset put to work.