



Let's Hear It for Infrastructure ... This Time?



On March 31, President Biden released the outline of his infrastructure package known as the “American Jobs Plan.” While at press time specifics are still to be determined, the package will invest about \$2 trillion this decade to be paid for by the president’s “Made in America” corporate tax plan.

Luckily, inland waterways are identified, along with aviation, in the Biden plan under the heading of “building world-class transportation infrastructure.”

The plan says, “... President Biden is calling on Congress to invest an additional \$17 billion in inland waterways, coastal ports, land ports of entry, and ferries, which are all essential to our nation’s freight. This includes a Healthy Ports program to mitigate the cumulative impacts of air pollution on neighborhoods near ports, often communities of color. These investments will position the United States as a global leader in clean freight and aviation.”

While timing and the path forward remain unclear, what we do know is that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi had said she wants to pass a bill off the House floor by July 4. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee Chairman Tom Carper wants to pass the highway portion of the bill by Memorial Day.

The highway bill reauthorization is set to expire September 30, which provides a shot clock against which something needs to happen on highway infrastructure. Already, there is some pushback on hiking the corporate tax rate to fund the plan.

It seems infrastructure packages have been pending for the past several years,

but to no real avail, so luckily, we are not starting from scratch. In fact, last year, the House Majority (Democrats) introduced and passed an infrastructure package that included full federal funding of \$3 billion for inland waterways lock modernization. While last year’s effort does not guarantee that lock modernization will be included in the final infrastructure package, the

“
*Waterborne commerce
on the inland rivers
can serve as a
transportation solution
for the future ...*”

fact that inland waterways were included in the last bill to gain some momentum could bode well for locks. WCI continues to work with members of Congress and our hope is that infrastructure can remain a bipartisan issue, with legislation meaningfully addressing the current needs of the system, and not just another weekly talking point or punch line to an inside-the-Beltway joke about infrastructure week.

In fact, there is already a blueprint for the administration and Congress to

follow for inland waterways infrastructure recapitalization. Over the last year-and-a-half, the Inland Waterways Users Board (IWUB) has been working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to update the Capital Investment Strategy and make recommendations to Congress on the order navigation projects should be considered to begin construction.

WCI believes the IWUB provides a boots-on-the-ground perspective on navigation capital projects that many Washington bureaucrats could not possibly have. Currently, there is a portfolio of navigation projects valued at \$7 billion that can be constructed if funding is provided, and it is imperative that the administration and Congress continue to rely on the IWUB as a resource for prioritizing lock modernization. Additionally, the IWUB is shuttered due to a Department of Defense review of advisory committees, but it is hoped that it will be reconstituted soon.

The inland waterways transportation infrastructure portfolio, specifically locks, makes an excellent case for their inclusion in a comprehensive infrastructure package. According to the National Waterways Foundation, barges provide the most fuel-efficient surface mode of transportation. Our industry’s one-ton of cargo moving 647 ton-miles per-gallon of fuel tops the other key surface modes (145 ton-miles for truck, and 477 ton-miles for locomotives). Lock modernization will not only limit the number of double cuts and reduce idle time for towboats but will also continue to bolster the efficiency and environmental benefits of inland waterways transportation.

While we continue to hear about roads, rail, bridges and broadband, let’s not forget inland waterways infrastructure and its critical importance to the nation. Waterborne commerce on the inland rivers can serve as a transportation solution for the future and since the waterways also serve as a plan for American jobs, they must remain part of the American Jobs Plan.



TRACY R. ZEA
President/CEO,
Waterways Council Inc.