

Opinion: Inland waterways are critical to Memphis and the nation

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GUEST COLUMNIST
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Leavell is co-owner and executive vice president with Memphis-based Wepfer Marine, which operates harbor and fleet services in nine locations along the lower Mississippi, Ohio and Tennessee rivers. Wepfer also provides trip towing on the lower Ohio River, a full-service shipyard with dry-docks, barge-cleaning services, crane services, dock repair and a machine shop in Memphis, fueling services in Greenville and Memphis, and salvage operations on the inland waterways.

Before the closure of the I-40 bridge, if you drove over any of the Memphis bridges that cross the Mississippi River, you might have looked down to see barges being pushed by towboats, but probably didn't know exactly what was being transported inside them, where their contents were going, and if – or how – it affects your life.

And very likely you didn't know just how significant the amount of commerce and maritime activity is on the Mississippi, in Memphis' Harbor, or on the other rivers in the state of Tennessee (Tennessee and Cumberland), or the many thousands of Tennessee jobs that are supported by the nation's inland waterways.

As critically important as it is, and except for the recent bridge and river closure, the inland waterways system is often out of sight, out of mind despite the football-field-sized barge tows carrying our nation's "building block" commodities. Those include agriculture products like fertilizer, grain and soybeans, steel and scrap products, chemicals, manufacturing inputs, containers, sand and salt for icy roads, energy products, aggregate materials for the construction industry, booster rocket parts for NASA, large cargoes for industrial use, military materiel, and much more.

Right here, 430,000 tons of commodities like grain, aggregates, coal, cement, steel and chemicals are transported through Memphis each day with a yearly passage of 150 million tons, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Within the state of Tennessee, the top commodities and cargoes transiting our state's inland waterways are gasoline and fuel oils valued at \$1.3 billion and \$1.2 billion, respectively.

The inland waterways system is a natural gem in the United States that *creates* opportunities for commercial transportation, but also for recreation, hydropower, municipal and industrial water supply, and national security.

And what *ensures* those benefits are dredging and the locks and dams on the major rivers that act much like a ladder to ensure that vessels can navigate across differing depths and do not get stuck or grounded, much like the cargo ship the *Ever Given* did recently in the Suez Canal that cost around \$1 billion for just one week of shipping delays.

Costs related to the I-40 bridge and river shutdown are not yet known.

While Memphis itself does not have locks and dams on its rivers right in our city limits, there are 26 locks along the Tennessee, Black Warrior Tombigbee Waterway, and Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway.

And to Memphis, dredging silt and sand build-up away from shipping channels and harbors is critically important to facilitate commerce and keep boats moving on our waterways.

In fact, the Memphis District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that maintains the inland waterways system in 2020 completed a keystone dike construction project, named Kentucky Point on the Mississippi River just across from New Madrid, Missouri, to help maintain a safe, reliable navigation channel for commercial towboats and to support the Corps' Mississippi River Channel Improvement navigation mission.

But commerce is not the only benefit of an efficient inland waterways system. There are jobs, recreational, national security, water supply, and quality of life benefits as well.

The economic impact of the inland waterways system overall supports 541,000 jobs, and here in Tennessee, in 2018, our state's ports, inland waterways and inland waterways-dependent industries supported 81,000 jobs, \$3.9 billion in personal income, \$6.3 billion in gross state product, and \$13.2 billion in total output that gave rise to more than \$517 million in state and local tax revenue, according to the National Waterways Foundation.

We depend upon an intermodal transportation system in this country, but waterborne commerce is also key to traffic congestion relief, safety and positive environmental impact.

Tennessee has 950 navigable miles of waterways, which is the 11th most in the nation. In 2018, 30.8 million tons of freight valued at \$5.2 billion moved on our state's inland waterways, which is equivalent to 770,000 trucks on our highways.

Moving freight by water means reducing highway traffic and the impacts of that to infrastructure like the I-40 bridge, fewer crashes on our highways, significantly less greenhouse gas emissions.

Overall, the inland waterways system saves between \$7 billion to \$9 billion annually over the cost of shipping by other modes, based on all goods currently being moved on the water compared to the same volume transported by rail, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Those cost savings are passed to us as consumers, which we all can appreciate.

And just like Memphis' most aged Frisco Bridge – the first built on the lower Mississippi River, and the only bridge south of St. Louis when it opened in 1892 – many of the locks and dams on the inland system were constructed during President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal of the 1930s. Nearly 70% of locks now exceed 80 years of age, with a design life of just 50 years.

For many years, the Corps of Engineers that manages and maintains the inland waterways, was woefully under-funded, doing its best to band-aid these aging structures to prevent catastrophic failure on shoe-string budgets.

Emergency lock closures were a regular occurrence. There was little money for new, modern lock construction, with existing lock chambers small and antiquated, built more for steamboat traffic than 21st-century vessels.

This is a timely opportunity to help enhance the inland waterways in the infrastructure jobs package (the American Jobs Plan) released by the Biden Administration that includes \$17 billion for “inland waterways, coastal ports, land ports of entry, and ferries.”

Our inland waterways' system supply chain, with its navigable channels and lock and dam infrastructure, offers the competitive edge our Nation's – and our state's – shippers rely upon in the tightening world marketplace.

The inland waterways transportation system moves commerce in the most energy-efficient, environmentally friendly, sustainable, traffic congestion relieving way, and keeps our U.S. economy booming with well-paying jobs.

America – and Tennessee – must continue to modernize its critical inland waterways infrastructure and keep its channels dredged and properly maintained for economic growth and opportunities in Memphis and around the world.

The I-40 bridge closure that also halted river navigation further underscores the necessity of our inland waterways transportation system and our nation's interconnected infrastructure needs.