

Lansing representatives consider year-round lakes shipping idea

By MICHAEL MATUSZEWSKI and TIM RICHARD

Suburban congressmen are intrigued by the idea of keeping the Great Lakes open to shipping all year, but no one is ready yet to start buying Finnish ice-breaking ships at \$50 million or more apiece.

They have all heard former U.S. Ambassador to Finland Mark Auslad's advocate buying ice-breakers, but the mood so far is to continue Coast Guard alternative pilot program to facilitate winter shipping.

One area congressmen says lake ports would have to be improved. Others have questions about how many industries would really benefit from ice-free Great Lakes.

REP. DAVID BONIOR (D-Mt. Clemens), who also represents part of Rochester and Avon Township, noted the proposal's advantages and disadvantages.

"There would certainly be some advantages to those who mine and ship ore from Lake Superior down to Cleveland and Detroit. There would be similar advantage to those transporting fuel to utility companies in the area," he said.

"There is great potential to ship wheat. It's grain through the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence Seaway. We haven't tapped that yet," Bonior said.

The Great Lakes area's failure to take advantage of its position in relation to the Midwestern Wheat Belt and the northern water route goes beyond the closure of the waterways by winter ice.

"Port development is in a terrible state. Port Huron is barely functioning. Detroit port needs help. We're not equipped for container cargo. We're way behind the times in our port technology and ability to serve."

"This has to be addressed especially

when we're talking about food and commodities," said Bonior.

Although some have said proposals to take action to keep the lakes open through the winter would meet opposition from coastal and Gulf shipping interests and Congressmen, Bonior said opposition would be minimal.

"I don't see us threatening the Gulf and coastal interests," he said. "We just don't do that much international shipping."

That may change, though, if the Great Lakes states can shore up their outdated ports, open up lake traffic year round, and tap the "vast potential" of shipping the grain of the Midwestern Wheat Belt.

U.S. REP. WILLIAM D. Ford (D-Taylor), whose 18th District includes Garden City, Westland and Canton Township, studied the matter in his role as vice-chairman of the Conference of Great Lakes Congressmen.

Congress showed interest in year-around shipping with the 1965 Rivers and Harbors Act, and in 1970 set up a demonstration program to test the benefits of year-around shipping, Ford said in an article for Waterways magazine.

Hopes rose, he said, when 15 million tons were shipped on the Great Lakes during the 1974-75 winter season (compared to 232 million tons in the nine warm months of 1973).

But the General Accounting Office raised several objections: Operating costs of keeping the lakes open would be triple the estimates; the winter cited was a mild one; how many industries would really benefit; and what was the effect of ice-breaking on hydroelectric power plants.

The congressional decision, said Ford, was to continue the demonstration programs two more years.

REP. JAMES BLANCHARD (D-

Pleasant Ridge), who also represents Troy, said Auslad's proposal was reasonable.

"I can accept his theory that it would have a positive economic impact on the Great Lakes region. I've even had people complain to me about the closing of the Lakes," Blanchard said.

He recalled that former President Gerald Ford was in favor of a plan to either purchase icebreakers or design them for use on the lakes. The Carter Administration has not taken a stand. President Jimmy Carter's lack of support was an important factor in the denial of a \$55 million appropriation for an icebreaker this year.

Blanchard predicted that, according

to congressional sources, if the issue come up for serious consideration the Great Lakes congressional delegation "would hold up quite favorably" under the pressure he said would be exerted by coastal and Gulf port interests.

"This wasn't always true. In the past, under the old seniority system, the Great Lakes congressmen never had enough clout, no matter how talented they were," he said.

Under the old system, he said, Southern congressmen were elected from one-party districts "forever." The North always had sufficient turnover to prevent its representatives from building up enough seniority to gain the chairmanships of important committees.

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