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January 2, 2008

Cash flow stalls river flow; Merrimack River dredging projects in need of federal funds

By Stephen Tait , Staff Writer

The Merrimack River needs dredging, but cash flow problems are holding up projects from Haverhill to Newburyport that would improve boat access.

The federal government approved spending \$654,000 to dredge the mouth of the river in Newburyport, but without an additional \$800,000 by the end of June, the project will be further delayed.

Another plan to dredge the river from Haverhill to the Route 1 bridge in Newburyport, a 16-mile stretch, is in its infancy. Money for that project is on a long waiting list and far from guaranteed.

In Haverhill, the project is listed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as a low priority for federal funding because it is for recreational, rather than industrial, uses. But Mayor James

Fiorentini and U.S. Congresswoman Niki Tsongas, D-Lowell, are pressing for the project. Tsongas has asked for federal money to study the possibility of dredging the river.

The mayor wants to dredge the river so large boats can dock downtown and their passengers can shop and dine.

The channel - built by the federal government in 1899 - is supposed to be at least 7 feet deep in all locations, according to the Corps of Engineers.

Recent tests show the channel is 4 to 6 feet deep in many places, particularly in the downtown Haverhill stretch. There also are sandy shoals where the river is as shallow as 3 feet, the tests show.

The goal of the dredging would be to make the river at least 8 feet deep throughout.

Hans Erwich, Newburyport's Harbor Commission chairman, said he remains hopeful the project at the mouth of the river will take place. He said the funding proves that the project is attracting the attention of federal lawmakers, mostly through the advocacy of U.S. Congressman John Tierney, a Salem Democrat.

"It is one step forward, and now you have to wait and see that the next step is hopefully not backward," Erwich said. "It is not under control yet, but we are hopeful."

During dredging, the Corps of Engineers typically removes about 150,000 cubic yards of sand from the Merrimack's entrance. In July and August 1999, the Corps of Engineers removed 145,000 cubic yards of sand and placed it near the shore of Plum Island.

The mouth of the river needs dredging since the channel is "shoaling," or filling in, due to currents. At low tide, the channel is supposed to be at least 12 feet deep.

The dredging needs to be done since larger boats - including commercial fishing vessels and large recreational craft - touch bottom during low tide.

Sand dredged from the river would be used to replenish eroded beaches, most likely on Plum Island this time, though an agreement between Salisbury and Newbury over the destination of the sand has yet to be finalized.

The total cost of the project is expected to be \$1.4 million, said Erwich and Jack Karalius, project manager for the Army Corps of Engineers. The only way to come up with the difference is for President Bush to include it in his budget in February or for Congress to push for additional funding, Karalius said.

Dredging should be done every three to five years, but Karalius said budget problems make the work much less frequent. The last dredging took place in 1999.

Scraping bottom

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers may dredge the Merrimack River in Newburyport and along a 16-mile stretch from Haverhill.

Dredging the mouth of the river: The Corps of Engineers typically removes about 150,000 cubic yards of sand from the Merrimack's entrance, placing the removed material near the shore of Plum Island.

Haverhill project: Goal would be to make the river at least 8 feet deep throughout. Recent tests show the channel is 4 to 6 feet deep in many places, particularly in the downtown Haverhill stretch.