

Washington ports to save river infrastructure project

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The ports of Kalama, Longview and Vancouver are pitching in to save a river project that had been in jeopardy after the Port of Portland declined to contribute to construction.

But Wednesday's Port of Longview action on the matter didn't come without conflict and second-guessing.

The four ports had planned months ago to each contribute about \$167,000 toward construction of three new stern buoys at Rainier, Kalama and Vancouver. The project is intended to reduce shipping bottlenecks on the Columbia River. A local funding match was needed for the ports to qualify for a \$1.4 million U.S. Army Corps of Engineers grant.

Stern buoys enable ships to tie up in the river while awaiting dock space or while holding out for more favorable tide and weather conditions. A recent Corps analysis found that the Lower Columbia needs the additional stern buoys, and supporters said the project would decrease air pollution because ships could remain stable without help from tug boats.

But the Port of Portland unexpectedly backed out of the agreement this spring, potentially killing the project. Struggling with lower cargo activity, Portland said it couldn't spare \$167,000 for the project from its budget.

In its 2015 to 2016 budget, Portland has \$295 million in revenues, but about three quarters of that is related to its three airports. The law prohibits the port from using aviation funds to support marine or industrial development functions. The marine revenues are about \$26.1 million, with \$22.8 million in operational expenses. This leaves approximately \$3.3 million for capital projects at port facilities.

Port of Longview commissioners at first declined to offer additional funds on top of the \$167,000 they had already committed. Although they still bristled at the idea, commissioners Wednesday changed their minds after Ports of Kalama and Vancouver said they would help make up Portland's share of the cost.

"It my understanding that (Portland's) marine operations are not as viable as they used to be, which is true. However, they certainly have the money," Commissioner Doug Averett at Wednesday's Port of Longview meeting.

Averett and Commissioner Jeff Wilson Wednesday approved an additional \$55,874 for the project, with Commissioner Bob Bagaason declining to vote.

In lieu of contributing to the stern buoys, Portland has offered to reduce the Washington ports' debt owed to Portland for the Columbia channel-deepening project, completed in 2010. Bagaason said it was "a scandal" that the Washington ports owed Portland millions, which spurred a conversation about how the ports could resolve this debt.

"This could be a re-occurring situation where any project we do from this point on, they'll come to us and say, 'Well, this will buy down your share of the debt to us.' And do we really want to be stuck in that box?" he asked.

The three Washington ports owe Portland \$3.1 million for channel deepening, according to the Port of Kalama.

Jason Lundquist, president of the local 21 of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, questioned how the stern buoy project would benefit Longview.

"How many container vessels do you see tied up to a stern buoy? There's none. So I think it's really unfortunate that we're going to allow ourselves to go down any system of creative financing," he said. "Let's put the Port of Longview to work. There's an opportunity here to utilize your lay berths. Let's utilize those."

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