River project may exclude port

By SHARON McRAE
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The Port of Greater Baton Rouge could be excluded from a project to deepen the lower Mississippi River channel — a decision that could make local facilities even less competitive in attracting large, ocean-going vessels of the future.

Port commissioners said at their meeting Monday such a move could send business to other ports and further diminish the status of the local port, which dropped from No. 4 to No. 5 in one year.

"Baton Rouge would be in an extreme disadvantage in bulk cargo business," commented John Dutton, port executive director.

A private study showed the cost of deepening the river would double if the project included the majority of the local port's jurisdiction, Joe Cocchiara told port commissioners Monday.

Deepening of the local waters would account for only 5 percent of the project's benefits, added Cocchiara, special assistant to the secretary of commerce in charge of the Mississippi River Deepening Project.

The majority of coal, grain and oil terminals at which ocean-going vessels would visit are situated only up to mile 170, he said.

The plan which Cocchiara presented to the commission would deepen the river to 50 feet from the mouth of the Gulf of Mexico upriver to mile 181, or just inside Ascension Parish near Donaldsonville.

Despite the estimated added cost and fewer benefits, port commissioners unanimously voted to support a project that would extend the dredging to mile 233, which would include the U.S. 190 Mississippi River Bridge. The depth of the river at Baton Rouge is 40 feet.

Initial construction would cost $167.9 million to deepen the river to mile 181, compared to $286.9 million that would extend the project to mile 230 which would include the Interstate 10 Mississippi River Bridge, according to figures presented by Cocchiara.

Those figures include the relocation of pipelines and cables, he said, which would cost $15 million up to mile 181 and $102 million up to mile 230.

According to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers permits, the industrial owners would be responsible for the costs to relocate or lower the pipelines and cables, he said.

The state's share of the initial construction costs would be $62.2 million up to mile 181, or $77.6 million up to mile 230, the figures showed.

Annual operation and maintenance costs to the state would be $6 million or $17 million, respectively, the figures showed.

Two bills now being considered by Congress could authorize and fund the project, the first such measures to be introduced in the past seven or eight years, Cocchiara said. The President wants considerable cost sharing by state government in new and ongoing water projects, he added.

Repayment of the state's costs would come through fees on cargo moving on ocean-going vessels, Cocchiara said.

"The charges would be collected at terminals, not at mid-stream operations," he said. "... We're not proposing any charges at terminals above mile 181.

However, some requirements on user charges will be determined in federal enabling legislation, he said.

Commissioner Leo Blaise questioned Cocchiara about the effect the user charge would have in sending vessels to competing ports.

"We're already in a non-competitive position with Gulfport and Mobile," Blaise said.

Those two ports are considering deep-water projects and may be looking at imposing user charges if their legislatures cannot fund the projects, Cocchiara said.

"While we're already fighting to stay alive, we're making ourselves less competitive by adding a user charge and adding $100 million to existing industry between (mile) 181 and (mile) 230," said commissioner William "Bill" Little, president of the Greater Baton Rouge Chamber of Commerce.

The deep-water issue "is going to get hot and heavy very soon," Dutton said. Cocchiara said he expects the project funding to come up in the 1986 legislative session.

The Corps of Engineers can have the contracts bid by 1987 and the project completed in three to four years, he said.

Officers elected

The Greater Baton Rouge Port commissioners elected Lawrence J. "Football" Badeaux on Monday as president for the fiscal year 1986.

Other officers elected were Sammy Coniglio, vice president; Oliver Jones, secretary, and Alvin "Bully" Dragt, treasurer.

Badeaux, a former mayor of Rosedale, has represented Iberville Parish on the commission since March 1976. He has served as vice president, secretary and treasurer.