

Journal Tribune

JOURNAL TRIBUNE WEDNESDAY, JULY 7, 2004

'River repair: A case study in success'

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I often quote Abraham Lincoln on the proper function of government. In 1854, he wrote that "the role of government is to do those things that a community of individuals cannot do alone, or cannot do so well." Recently, my staff and I were called upon to help the sometimes slow wheels of government move rapidly to fix a problem that, realistically, only the government could solve. Thanks to the expertise and cooperation of a slew of federal, state and local officials, in just a few days we were able to help line up the Army Corps of Engineers to provide essential assistance: Emergency dredging of the Kennebunk River.

For several years, the Town of Kennebunkport and local commercial maritime operators had been concerned that sand was accumulating in the entrance to the Kennebunk River's channel. Local users of the river had reported that, under certain circumstances, there were areas where vessels could hit bottom coming into the harbor. Indeed, in 1995, a boat with three men aboard broke up and sank in the mouth of the river, and recently, a woman was injured when a whale watching vessel hit bottom, prompting her to file a \$1 million claim against the owner.

Earlier this year, I had succeeded in having a provision included in the House appropriations bill that covers water projects undertaken by the Army Corps. When that bill is enacted, \$500,000 will be made available to dredge the Kennebunk River in the next fiscal year. But on June 22nd, I learned that the situation had deteriorated further, and that a quick fix was needed immediately. According to Linda Littell, chairman of the Kennebunk River Committee, the harbor master believed it was just a matter of time before another serious accident occurs.

Fortunately, an Army Corps vessel was already in the area, doing emergency dredging of the Wells Harbor. Would it be possible to send the vessel, the Currituck, to Kennebunkport after that job?

At a hastily-called meeting with town officials, the Kennebunk River Committee, local operators and the New England District Army Corps Director of Operations and Maintenance, my staff person, Mark Ouellette, learned that there were a number of problems that had to be surmounted. First of all, the window of opportunity was very small, since the Currituck was scheduled to go south the next day after finishing work in Wells. Timing was also crucial because the success of the short tourist season depended on open access in the river. Second, there was no money budgeted by the Army Corps for the project. And third, since the work would disturb the marine environment, the project could not go forward without the necessary permits from the State. Frankly, the Army Corps official was pessimistic.

At that point, I decided to make a pitch to the people at Army Corps headquarters in Washington, D.C., since they would play an important role in deciding whether to fund the project. I explained that the waterway was dangerous; unless the work was done soon, there was a serious risk that a boat would sink or turn sideways in the channel and be forced into the breakwater, threatening human injury and major disruption of the commercial use of the river. The Kennebunk is an important economic engine for the region, not only providing many recreational uses, but also serving a vital role for a significant fishing community. Senator Susan Collins also called to urge the Army Corps to take this action.

Fred Carver, Jr., the person in charge of civil works at the Corps, was convinced of the merits of the project, and agreed to re-arrange the Currituck's schedule and find the money to do the dredging. However, we still had to clear another difficult hurdle: We would have to obtain the necessary state permits by the end of the week. Usually, obtaining this clearance is exacting and slow. We had a head start, however, since a permit had already been issued for the more thorough dredging that would be done when the \$500,000 appropriation came through. After consulting with Governor John Baldacci's office, the Maine Department of Environmental Protection, and the Maine Department of Marine Resources, the state agreed to amend the previously-issued permit to cover this emergency dredging.

Thanks to the goodwill and hard work of a lot of people, we were able to get all the pieces together in about 48 hours. On July 4th, the Currituck will start about five days of dredging in the Kennebunk River.