

We Can Live With This Dredging Plan

Lynn Fiorenzano and J. Michael Keyworth

After 20-plus years of stalemate, it appears that Rhode Island is edging toward a dredging plan that can move forward. To say that the marine trades are eager for its success is an understatement. Marinas, shipyards, transportation terminals and large ship operators have been working toward this for years, devising and submitting new, innovative, conciliatory proposals every time that one constituency or another raised noisy objections to the previous one.

The present plan must succeed, for it satisfies the objectives of environmentalists, the fishing industry, the marine trades, the cities and towns, and every other group with a major stake in the process. If any sense of fairness or perspective remains in the Ocean State, it will succeed.

That dredging needs to occur – and soon – is obvious to anyone who has studied the question. The Providence River Ship Channel has silted in from its previous, federally mandated depth of 40 feet, to a mere 28 feet. The channel has narrowed, too, so that only one ship may use it at a time. Such restrictions seriously delay the workings of water-borne commerce, and increase the risk of grounding every time that a heavily laden vessel brings needed goods to Rhode Island, or leaves with revenue-generating exports.

Rhode Islanders spend an additional \$60 million every year in increased energy costs as a direct result of not dredging, and these costs will increase annually as the channel continues to shoal. Eventually, no ships will be able to reach the Port of Providence, and all our heating oil will have to be delivered by tractor-trailer truck: 200,000 annually to meet our current needs.

Compared with the risk of an oil spill because of grounding in the narrowed channel, or the impact that 23 additional tanker trucks entering the state every single hour of every day would have on our air quality, a carefully regulated plan for dredge disposal represents a substantial environmental benefit. We hope there are no environmentalists so shortsighted and irresponsible as to be willing to accept these grave future risks in order to prevent the relatively minor and temporary impact of the proposed plan.

The need to dredge does not stop with the Providence River ship channel. Dozens of marinas throughout the state hope to dredge under the plan, and in doing so these small businesses will regain hundreds of boat slips they have lost over the years to siltation. This will generate new jobs and new tax revenues, eliminate the (literally) daily groundings that occur in several marinas, and make boating safe and more enjoyable for residents and tourists alike. Rhode Island is world-renowned for sailing, but reputations are fragile things, and sailors are not tied to any one vacation destination.

Rhode Island must assure that adequate deep-water facilities continue to exist if we hope to remain the destination of choice for thousands of boats that arrive every year from Delaware, Maine, France and elsewhere.

The original disposal site identified by the Environmental Impact Statement, Site 3 off Hog Island, has many opponents. Let us keep our options open. Another disposal site now being considered by the major stakeholder groups has many apparent benefits. This location, Site 69B, is outside Narragansett Bay. It is large enough to accommodate future dredging projects in addition to the present one. It is an area that, we

believe, is not especially productive for fishing. And the currents there are slow, so the deposited material will remain stable.

Because Site 69B lies outside the Bay, however, the costs of disposal will be considerably greater, by \$15 million or so. If this is the price we must pay to achieve consensus, then members of the Rhode Island Marine Trade Association (RIMTA) are willing to pay up. Part of these added costs will come directly out of the pockets of marina owners, but we hope this willingness will elicit like compromise from other groups that believe the present site is not quite perfect. No site or disposal method can possibly be without objection. But then, not dredging is also fraught with serious objections. What we have in Site 69B is the best possible location from the multiple standpoints of environmental and fisheries science, economics, regulatory acceptability, technical feasibility and – perhaps most importantly – the potential for political consensus.

Every other coastal state in the union has a dredging policy, including Maine, Oregon and others that are notable for their environmental protection policies. Environmentalists nationwide have seen that dredging is a reasonable and necessary component of commerce, and not some rare form of catastrophe imposed by insensitive business interests. RIMTA's environmental record is exemplary. We wrote a "best practices" guide that has been adopted around the nation as a model for environmentally friendly marina operations. More recently, we spearheaded regulations that established the nation's first statewide "no discharge zone" for boaters – a move that was ridiculed by the influential *Marine Business Journal* as wild-eye environmental fanaticism.

We don't think so. We live and work on the Bay, and we're just as interested in keeping it clean as everyone else in Rhode Island.

We also need to earn a living, as do the marine transportation companies, dockworkers, shipyard workers and literally thousands of others who depend upon a functioning shipping channel to carry commerce quickly and safely between Rhode Island and the rest of the world. Those jobs will remain safe only if Save the Bay and the Ocean State Fishermen's Association now take the lead in persuading their constituencies that dredging must occur, and that Site 69B represents the most acceptable, viable solution.

The Army Corps of Engineers has spent many years, and millions of dollars, trying to help Rhode Island accomplish its desired goal of dredging. At every turn, some constituency has scuttled the process, and now we are informed that the Corps is losing patience. If we don't agree to the present plan and dredge now, it will not get done in the foreseeable future.

That would prove devastating to Rhode Island. We hope, therefore, that all parties will now work together in support of the present plan, in order to achieve a goal that will truly benefit the entire state.

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