

Port project in peril?

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Construction on the Port of Prescott's \$35-million wharf project could be delayed as long as two years if the provincial environment minister does not sign a declaration order.

"That would be devastating for the whole region," Edwards-burgh- Cardinal Mayor Larry Dishaw said in an interview following a public tour of the port on Friday.

Last summer, the federal and provincial governments announced they would cover two-thirds of the wharf cost through stimulus funding, while the port will pay one-third.

With funding in place, Dishaw said the management corporation is ready to start building the wharf on the east side of the port this summer, but it needs a green light from the province.

"We're a bit stymied at this point," he said of Environment Minister John Gerretsen's hesitance in signing off. "His staff said he is cautious."

Dishaw said the wharf project is vital for moving ahead on new development and growth for eastern Ontario -and for averting a potential environmental disaster.

Because the current wharf is not stable, the St. Lawrence River could be infused with salt from the docks if the wharf were to slide into the water, wreaking environmental harm on aquatic life.

Edwardsburgh-Cardina I Councillor Pat Sayeau said the port management group is worried the current deteriorating wharf will fall, causing salt to fall into the river and reducing business.

"The wharf is so important to this facility. ... It's so important to the whole region," Dishaw said, referring to the area the port serves, an expanse that extends west to Port Hope and Peterborough and east to the Pontiac region of Quebec.

In 2009, the port recorded its busiest year since the 1950s, partly due to the increase in corn shipments, reported Sayeau.

With the wharf project funding in place and new grain storage bins built, the port is already planning for future growth. Dishaw plans to promote the port as an opportunity for Chinese entrepreneurs when he visits China next month.

But he warned a delay in building the wharf could stall that growth.

With help from the South Nation Conservation Authority, the port has already created a plan for new fish habitat to counter any destruction of current habitat in the St. Lawrence, Dishaw said.

The port has \$250,000 already earmarked for fish habitat, he noted.

The Akwesasne Mohawk band council, known for strong environmental beliefs, has also given its approval, said Dishaw.

"We've done everything humanly possible to look at all the issues to make this go forward."

But construction won't begin until the Ontario cabinet approves and Gerretsen signs the declaration order.

And the earliest would be following a 30-day public input period, which has yet to begin.

If Gerretsen requests a full environmental assessment, the project could be delayed as long as two years, putting other projects in jeopardy and stunting growth for the regional economy, suggested the Edwardsburgh-Cardinal mayor.

On Friday, he asked about 50 people who had come to the port for a public tour for their help. Dishaw said once the 30-day input period begins, they can write letters in support of the project.

The new wharf will provide 7.5 hectares of additional dock space, Sayeau said.

In other developments, four new steel storage bins at the port are already onsite and are expected to be ready for use starting in July, said foreman Lance Stephenson. The bins cost \$5.6 million.

The port includes a grain elevator almost one quarter of a kilometre long that provides storage for wheat, soybeans and corn. With its strategic location close to Highway 401, main rail line, the township industrial park, St. Lawrence River and an international bridge, the port handles salt, corn, wheat and other grains.

Trucks, trains and ships arrive and cargo is unloaded on a first-come, first-served basis, explained Sayeau.

The port can unload up to 12,000 tonnes of grain per hour, he noted.

"We think it's a great opportunity for the farmers of eastern Ontario," Sayeau added. "Often crops get left on the field if they have no place to store it."

If the port did not exist to handle the salt that is transported by ship, an extra 11,600 trucks would have to travel on Highway 401 each year, he said.

The port was built in 1931 and has a staff of 32.

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