

# OPINION



## Point of View

by Ron Chapman

After attending the Corps of Engineers open meeting on February 23<sup>rd</sup> my concerns about the future of St. Bernard parish and the Lower Ninth Ward increased tremendously. It appears that the Corps has little concern about the fate of our communities or the people who live here in their quest to facilitate the needs of the maritime industry.

The case under discussion concerns construction of a new lock structure in the Industrial Canal. On the surface this would appear to be of little concern for us, but once discussions began, reality set in.

St. Bernard and the Lower Ninth Ward have not fully recovered from Hurricane Katrina as of yet. Our pre-storm population was about

68,000 the parish currently has a population of about 50,000 and growing. The Lower Ninth Ward had a pre-storm population of 14,000 and as of the 2010 census had only 2,842 living there. That number likely has increased in the past six years, but we all know that little effort has been made to bring that community back despite all the talk and attention. The Lower Ninth will grow because the infrastructure has been put in place.

The hopes and dreams of all people living below the Industrial Canal could be dashed by the Corps of Engineers' planned project. If it only involved marine traffic in the canal, no one would care. Realistically, everyone knows it is a shipping bottleneck constructed in 1923 and

needs an update.

The problem arises because the planned improvements seriously impact vehicle traffic crossing the canal. This is where the real problem exists and the threat to the quality of life and economic development of those communities below the canal. Making matters worse, it appears the Corps is intending to use out-of-date population numbers when doing their calculations on traffic flows.

Written below is a compilation of the issues presented at the meeting. Accordingly, the new lock system will be shifted above (north) of the Chalborne Bridge and increased in length from 650 feet with a width of 75 feet to 1,200 feet long with a width of 110 ft. A new LOW-LEVEL bridge will be constructed at St. Claude.

Several issues immediately arise:

1. Once the improvements have been completed, one can expect an increase in tug traffic because this antiquated bottleneck will have been replaced with a modern structure. This means more canal traffic which means the bridges will have to open more often. This especially applies to the new low St. Claude Bridge

they intend to construct.

2. Since the lock will be located above the Chalborne Bridge, Mississippi River barges will spill into the Industrial Canal up to the new lock system. This means when the Mississippi River rises over 17 feet, the water level in the canal will rise as well. The clearance for tug and tows will also lower thus demanding that even the Chalborne Bridge may have to open more often.
3. The additional length and width of the new lock will accommodate three tugs and longer tows, some nearly 1,000 feet long. When the lock opens each tow will come out in sequence. That means that three tows will have to pass under the bridges, but considering their length, likely BOTH bridges will have to be opened at the same time to accommodate this train of barge traffic.

4. Since the tows come out in sequence, are longer, travel at a low speed, and have to have sufficient safety distance between them, the length of time that BOTH bridges will be open will increase at least three-fold...likely longer because each tow is longer.

What became even more enlightening was a discussion I listened to given by a tow

boat operator. When it was suggested that the distance between the tows would be about 100 feet, he interrupted and said that safety required 2,500 feet between tows. He later explained that if the tow is empty it takes more speed to control it and 2,500 feet is needed to stop in an emergency. If the tow is heavy, it takes 2,500 to stop in a regular situation. Thus the distance between the first barge and the last tug could be 8,000 feet or nearly 1-5 miles!

5. This project will in effect cut off St. Bernard Parish and LOWER NINTH WARD COMPLETELY from the rest of the city more often for a longer period of time. The traffic accumulation waiting for the bridges to re-open will create significant traffic snarls on both sides of the Industrial Canal seriously impacting neighborhoods located nearby.

Consider the impact of these incredibly long waits taking place more often than the bridge opens now and one can easily imagine the negative impact this "improvement" will have on the quality of life on every neighborhood below the canal and some above. What if an emergency vehicle

needs to cross? Consider the impact on people just trying to get to work or meeting appointment schedules. All of our lives will be determined by barge traffic!

The residents of St. Bernard, Plaquemines, and Lower Ninth Ward have a war on their hands. It is essential that the Corps comes to recognize that their plans, while necessary for maritime interests, must take into consideration the quality of life of those persons impacted by the traffic situation the improvements will generate.

They must design this lock system in such a way as to reduce traffic problems...not increase them! One component should be a high bridge at St. Claude. The approaches are long enough to accommodate that and if there are regulations concerning the angle of approaches...change them or seek an emergency suspension of those regulations.

Improving the economic situation of the maritime industry must not come at the expense of destroying the quality of life and economic development of surrounding communities. People had better wake up and take some action.