

Lock restoration could boost tourism, officials say

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With a surprise announcement by U.S. Rep. Thomas Reynolds late last week, the city of Lockport has gone from wishing to being on the edge of wow.

Reynolds got \$3.25 million tacked on to the House version of the federal Transportation Equity Act to fund restoration of the Flight of Five locks downtown. Mayor Michael Tucker says he's been told the request is virtually assured affirmation by the House when it votes on the bill this week and, since the Senate version of the act has already been cleared, will await only the president's signature to be a done deal.

The quickening pace of a project that's had a "someday" feel to it took restoration champions by surprise.

"Congressman Reynolds' announcement frankly caught us off guard," said Flight of Five committee chairman Peter Welsby said. "We weren't prepared for it to move so quickly. I cannot stress enough how grateful we are."

Restoration is pitched as a driver of significant economic development downtown. Estimates supplied to the city by state development experts suggest the flight restored to working order could lure upward of 400,000 visitors annually.

If even half that number came, the impact would be phenomenal, Tucker has said in championing the effort.

In tandem with canal cruises and underground cave tours, two solid draws already, the Flight of Five is seen as magnet for tourist dollars. The demand that would be created for restaurants, shops, overnight accommodations and entertainment venues could breath new life into a battered old city.

"The Flight of Five is going to put us on the map. It's going to generate a tremendous amount of development," he said. "People come from all over the world to see the locks. It's unbelievable."

Assuming the federal funding is a done deal, the city's work will have just begun, Welsby said.

Whether the flight can be fully restored isn't yet clear. The flight is composed of Locks 67 to 71, unused for nearly a century now by boats navigating the 60-foot drop in the Niagara Escarpment, but serving a crucial function as a canal spillway today.

"The (state) Canal Corporation has major concerns about its ability to operate the canal if we restore the Flight," Welsby said. "We may find a partial restoration is the best we can get."

Restoration, which carries a tentative price tag of \$3.5 million to \$5 million, would be composed of several steps.

First, canal sediment testing has to be done to determine whether the area is safe to send people to work in.

Then construction has to be undertaken to stabilize the remnants of the flight's deteriorating wooden base, masonry and arched footbridges that carry people over the locks.

Finally, to restore working order, the locks' gates would have to be put back in.

"That's where there are big hurdles to overcome," Welsby said. "It's a spillway now and the water would have to go somewhere else."

Also, modern, flat footbridges are used regularly by canal maintenance workers, but those could prevent boats from getting through the locks.

With encouragement from state Sen. George Maziarz, R-Newfane, state agencies are listening and getting oriented to the project. Reynolds' securing of a major portion of financing makes the sell to necessary partners including Empire State Development, the Governor's Office for Small Cities and the Canal Corporation a lot easier, Tucker said.

"When I have three-and-a-quarter million in my back pocket, that gives this project huge credibility. We are on our way."