

Petri pledges support for breakwater repairs

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
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<http://www.ozaukeepress.com/images/060613/waterSM.png> **Congressman says he'll do everything he can to secure funding for crumbling, hazardous harbor structure**

U.S. Rep. Tom Petri, who toured the Port Washington breakwater with city officials Friday, said he is prepared to do whatever he can to facilitate repairs to the deteriorating structure.

"It's clear to the naked eye and even more apparent when you're out there that it's nearing the end of its useful life and could be a real problem," Petri told Ozaukee Press Friday afternoon. "You take one wrong step and you're in the drink, and getting out of there could be quite difficult."



"I'm quite hopeful we can make real progress and get this project to the point where it's on people's to-do list in the next few months to a year."

That doesn't mean the project will move ahead right away, Petri stressed, but that there would be a meaningful commitment by the Army Corps of Engineers to make the repairs soon.

"These things always take longer than you expect, but once in a while you get luckier than you think," he said.

Port Washington Mayor Tom Mlada, who was among the officials who met with Petri on Friday, told the Common Council Tuesday that representatives of the Kewaunee office of the Army Corps of Engineers will be in the city next week to assess the breakwater.

Petri said he or a representative from his office will be at the meeting with the Army Corps, and will try to have representatives of senators Tammy Baldwin and Ron Johnson there as well.

"We're going to try to see if we can't identify people in their office and get them to come by, be more familiar with the situation and look for avenues to move this forward," Petri said. "We'll be there and lend our support to let the Corps know this is a priority."

He's already raised the issue with representatives of the Detroit office of the Army Corps when they visited his office several months ago, said Petri, who is a longstanding member of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

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"I told them this is something I'm eager to work on," Petri said.

Mlada said he also plans to invite state officials, such as Rep. Duey Stroebel and Sen. Glenn Grothman, to next week's meeting with the Army Corps.

The city is hoping the Army Corps will revise the breakwater's status from "needing action soon," which was established after a 2009 assessment, to "immediate action," Mlada said.

"Clearly we're at a point of immediate action being necessary," he said.

Mlada said he was surprised during Friday's tour to see just how much damage there was on the breakwater.

"I was shocked at the level of deterioration in recent years," he said.

It's not just the top of the structure that's deteriorating, making it difficult for people to walk along the structure, he said.

"What's more alarming is the deterioration along the face on either side," Mlada said. "The harbor side is as bad as the lake side."

It makes more sense to repair the breakwater now than to wait until it fails and then replace it, city officials said. Not only would the cost be significantly less, it would also save the city potentially significant damage to the lakefront and perhaps downtown.

The fix, Mlada said, involves placing a 10 to 12-inch concrete cap on top of the breakwater and extending it by four inches on either side, then filling in rubble on both sides of the wall.

"A \$1 million fix of this structure is a great investment," he said. "It would save the city a lot of heartache and money."

After hearing the city's case, Petri agreed that it makes sense to do the work now.

"It's going to have to be done sooner or later," he said. "They seemed quite convinced that doing it sooner rather than later would not only be safer but less costly. That just seems like the prudent thing to do."

Petri said he will work with the city to identify ways to get the breakwater repairs funded.

"We will look for opportunities to take legislative steps to make sure the path is clear," he said.

Petri said the breakwater repairs would typically be included in the Water Resource Development Action, but specific projects are no longer included in this bill.

"Any discussion of specific projects in specific communities is considered an earmark," he

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said, and the House has a ban on earmarks. "In the last few years, the word earmark has taken on a lot of political baggage.

"This doesn't make it impossible, but more difficult to do."

The Senate's rules on earmarks aren't as strict, he said, so getting a senator to include the project might be an option.

City officials have also identified the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund as a potential revenue source for the repairs.

This fund has a surplus of at least \$4.6 billion. Petri said he is among the sponsors of a bill to broaden the scope of the projects the fund finances so it could be used for work like the breakwater repairs, but said this will likely take time to implement.

"I wouldn't wait for that," he said, although he said he will continue to work on the bill.

"We just need to work on a number of fronts," he said.

Helping the city's chances to get federal funding for the repairs is the fact that it is currently undertaking public-private efforts to improve not only the breakwater but the lakefront, purchasing ladders and life rings for the structure, Petri said.

Even if the breakwater's condition is upgraded to reflect the fact it needs immediate attention and federal funding is found, Mlada said, it will still be years before work is done.

"It would still be two years out, but we'd be further along than we are now," he said.