

James K. Lyons is director and CEO of the Alabama State Port Authority. His e-mail address is jlyons@asdd.com.

By JAMES K. LYONS

Special to the Press-Register

"To live by a large river is to be kept in the heart of things."

— John Haines

American Poet

For many of us in Alabama, rivers lie at the heart of our everyday lives by providing us energy, commerce and recreation. And for many of our public agencies, rivers lie at the heart of programs and services that protect and ensure our way of life.

So it should not be surprising that Sen. Richard Shelby, R- Ala., in his position as chairman of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee for Commerce, Justice and Science, would seek opportunities for his constituency to sustain our river systems and the commercial, recreational and security interests that flow from Alabama's waters.

Securing such interests is just what the senator has done in obtaining a \$20 million appropriation for a disaster response center in Mobile — specifically, in the proposed National Maritime Museum of the Gulf of Mexico, which is to be built on the Mobile River waterfront.

The funding recipient would be NOAA — the National Ocean & Atmospheric Administration, which is a federal agency whose principal mission is to "conserve and manage coastal and marine resources to meet our nation's economic, social and environmental needs."

The proposed funding not only positions a key federal agency in Mobile to further enhance public understanding of the maritime environment, culture and industry, but it also brings to the Alabama State Port Authority and the maritime industry another disaster response and recovery component that greatly benefits our citizens and our port industries.

Critics, however, claim that the \$20 million is merely "pork," and they question the logic of placing NOAA's disaster response center on river frontage that is vulnerable to hurricane storm surge.

Further, critics pontificate in the vaguest of terms what is or is not necessary in disaster response.

What the public should know is that NOAA is a maritime industry and homeland security strategic partner.

The public also should know that in Mobile, all public authorities with jurisdiction over maritime-related industries and security are located in downtown Mobile, either along or within two blocks of the river.

The close proximity of planning and response groups provides the Port Authority,

Mobile and all of Alabama with a more proactive, better-coordinated disaster response and recovery team.

Further, the ability to quickly meet and mobilize resources in a matter of minutes rather than hours or days provides for better communications in preparedness planning and recovery response to any disaster.

To suggest that NOAA will be incapable of doing its job at a downtown Mobile location, which may or may not be affected by storm surge, is to discount the fact that devastating hurricane impacts can be experienced at any inland location.

One merely needs to ask folks in the inland areas in Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana how Ivan's and Katrina's winds affected their property and the delivery of services.

How unfortunate that nearly one year after Katrina, Alabama's leadership continues to receive Monday-morning- quarterback calls on how and where we should structure and deploy our disaster response teams.

The truth is, despite the destructive impacts levied by Katrina's 200-year storm event, downtown Mobile's floodwaters had receded within hours of landfall. Almost every federal, state and local agency involved in recovery reported for work in flood-ravaged buildings or fall-back facilities.

All of us who were impacted by the storm, including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Coast Guard, NOAA, the Alabama State Port Authority and others rapidly restored aids to navigation, vessel traffic and commerce to significant levels within days of Katrina's landfall.

All was accomplished in part because of preparation planning and working relationships established through the accessibility and close proximity of our offices and staff.

Perhaps Sen. Shelby's vision for federal funding is to harness local, state and federal resources at the "heart" of our river and our port, so that the maritime community can efficiently and effectively provide jobs, commerce and services that maintain our quality of life.

The public is fairly familiar with NOAA's primary mission to serve as the nation's source of weather data, forecasts and warnings.

For many in the Gulf Coast region, NOAA's National Hurricane Center and Storm Prediction Center are the chief sources for severe storm forecasting and tracking.

But NOAA's contributions are not limited to just the weather.

NOAA collaborates and provides technical support to local, state and federal agencies for rapid and effective response to oil and chemical spills, vessel groundings, search-and-rescue efforts, hazards to navigation and coastal environments, and national security incidents.

NOAA's participation was critical in pre-Ivan and pre-Katrina planning and storm response along the Gulf Coast. NOAA along with Coast Guard Mobile, US Army Corps of Engineers' Mobile District and the Alabama State Port Authority conducted daily, and sometimes twice daily, meetings prior to the storm to coordinate hydrographic survey efforts in the USCG District 8 region extending from Gulfport, Miss. to east of Panama City, Fla.

In Ivan's and Katrina's aftermath, NOAA assisted these same agencies in surveying and charting underwater obstructions and hazards to facilitate cleanup. This important work reduces risks to the seaport, shipping, commercial fishing, and recreational industries; and it provides an underwater roadmap for bettering the navigational safety and environmental condition in our waters.

NOAA's contributions to navigation can be further examined through its recent partnership with the Coast Guard to produce an electronic navigational chart program.

This program combines both agencies' navigation data, along with information gathered through LORAN, GPS and DGPS, to significantly improve navigation safety and security.

Another key partnership between the USCG and NOAA facilitates data monitoring of land-based, satellite-tracked personal locator beacons, which has been responsible for the rescue of more than 14,000 people since the program was launched in 1982.

This program is being expanded to track emergency beacons for marine vessel and aircraft traffic.

Given the region's high traffic of pleasure craft, this service is vital to all citizens, not just the maritime industry.

NOAA is also a key partner in our homeland security efforts. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security and its jurisdictional agencies, such as the Coast Guard, Customs and Border Protection and others, are working with NOAA to communicate critical all-hazards alerts and warnings directly through the NOAA All-Hazards Network.

NOAA's Network serves as an additional delivery mechanism for sending life-saving information nationally, regionally or locally.

Other collaborative efforts between NOAA and the Coast Guard target illegal harvesting of the ocean's endangered species, such as the sea turtle, and assist in marine pollution spills that threaten species and natural resources.