

Illinois lawmakers urge White House to make levees a priority



By Robert Koenig, Beacon Washington correspondent

Posted 4:10 pm, Wed., 2.16.11

WASHINGTON - Fearing that the budget-cutting wave in Congress might damage federal support for levee improvements, a bipartisan group of Illinois lawmakers is urging the White House to include levees in the proposed infrastructure plans.

"Protecting our communities from floods is a bipartisan issue, and we are working together in Illinois to address the substantial levee repair and maintenance needs our state faces," the legislators wrote to President Barack Obama, a fellow Illinoisan.

"This is a nationwide problem, and the economic downturn has left states, local governments and levee districts in need of assistance in undertaking this work."

The letter was signed by U.S. Sens. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., and Mark Kirk, R-Ill., as well as U.S. Reps. Jerry Costello, D-Bellefonte, and John Shimkus, R-Collinsville. They asked Obama to include levees and water infrastructure improvements in the administration's proposed program to improve the nation's infrastructure.

Obama has been getting appeals from other lawmakers who represent states along the Mississippi River, and the New Orleans Times-Picayune reported Wednesday that "a new, multi-state organization" called the Levee Issues Alliance is being formed to lobby the White House and Congress on behalf of communities in danger of losing federal flood insurance because their levees don't meet new standards.

According to the newspaper, the Levee Issues Alliance "includes government officials and other stakeholders from Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi and Illinois" -- all states in which the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has notified communities that stretches of some levees do not meet standards set a few years ago. If the levees are not brought up to the standard, flood insurance rates will go up substantially.

"We have been working for years on improving our nation's levees -- this is a \$100 billion national problem, and it needs to be addressed in a

bipartisan way," Costello said in a statement. "In our area and across the nation, we are dealing with communities that need assistance with levee maintenance and flood protection. For that reason, we are continuing to urge President Obama to include a strong federal commitment to our levees as we move forward with efforts to invest in our nation's infrastructure."

Costello and Shimkus, along with staffers for the two senators, held a "[Southern Illinois levee summit](#)" in December to discuss the levees and flood insurance. The lawmakers are also working to address related levee issues with state officials, local levee districts and the [Delta Regional Authority](#) -- a federal and state partnership that aims to help economic development along the lower Mississippi River.

"Levees are no less vital to our national infrastructure than roads and rails," said Kirk. "I particularly worry about our ability to protect from floods and maintain the jobs that depend on riverways. In Illinois, Granite City's Lock 27 alone sees more than 70 million tons of traffic annually through its gates. If we are serious about a national dialogue on infrastructure, we must include our waterways in the discussion."

Durbin said the Illinois congressional delegation "has a long history of working across the aisle to make sure the backbone of our infrastructure is upgraded and protected." He added, "Improving the levees in Illinois and across the country will help save lives and keep property safe from floods."

Calling levee repairs "vital to our nation's river infrastructure," Shimkus said in a statement that such repairs "should be a national priority of the president."

Contact Beacon Washington correspondent [Robert Koenig](#).

[Next >](#)