

Speaker: Stop using Great Lakes as lavatory

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Times Photo "Very conservatively," a \$25 billion investment in Great Lakes restoration would result in up to \$100 billion of economic benefit for the region, economist John Austin said during a breakfast meeting at the Double Tree hotel.

The 60-foot-long **Earth Voyager** has spent the summer sailing the Great Lakes - and stopping at ports to highlight the need for federal funding to restore the waterways.

Everywhere the 60-foot trimaran goes, sewage overflows are a major issue, says Capt. Wayne Jurs.

"We can't use them as a lavatory anymore," Jurs said of the lakes.

He piloted the boat to downtown Bay City on Thursday, docking it outside the Doubletree hotel and conference center.

Inside, economist John Austin told a crowd of about 140 government, business and environmental leaders that a \$25 billion restoration plan to upgrade sewer systems, clean up toxic sediments and combat invasive species is worth the investment.

Austin co-authored a 2007 report for the Brookings Institution which concluded that "very conservatively," a \$25 billion investment in restoration would result in up to \$100 billion of economic benefit for the region. The \$25 billion price tag is based on updated numbers from a Great Lakes Regional Collaboration strategy released in 2005.

"It's just not a nice thing to do for the environment," said Austin, who lives in Ann Arbor and is executive director of the New Economy Initiative for Southeast Michigan.

The funding is a key to transforming the industrial economy that sprung up around the lakes to a knowledge economy, he said.

"We created great enterprises that made a mess," he said.

"If we invest more resources and we do this (restoration) work, it's a huge economic engine for Michigan and the Midwest."

The \$100 billion impact is based on jobs associated with improving infrastructure and freshwater research and the value of clean beaches and healthy fisheries.

"If the benefits outweigh the costs, it's a good investment," Austin said.

Bay City Mayor Charles Brunner said he hopes his city and others in the Saginaw Bay watershed can tap into the \$25 billion some day to fix aging sewer systems, which routinely spill millions of gallons of partially treated human waste into area rivers, sometimes resulting in beach closures and advisories.

"The solutions are simple, but the only problem is, they're costly," the mayor said.

Brunner said he thinks sewage overflows from Bay City are a "huge" contributor to muck, or dead algae, that has fouled bay beaches with increasing intensity in recent years.

But separating sections of Bay City's sewage system where sanitary waste and stormwater flow through the same pipes would cost millions of dollars the city doesn't have, Brunner said.

And even if the city made the upgrades, other cities up river may continue to discharge waste unless a restoration of the Great Lakes becomes a national priority for Congress and the next president, said Shirley Roberts, executive director of the Bay City Convention & Visitors Bureau.

"Even with current conditions, recreation fishing, waterfowl hunting and boating all generate millions in economic impact just in the bay region," Roberts said.

With national funding for a restoration, "We can only imagine how much more the economic impact would be in the region and state," she said.

Chad Lord, a director with the National Parks Conservation Association in Washington, D.C., said his group is "very confident" that the next Congress will approve the restoration plan during the next presidential term.

But it's important that people in Bay City and elsewhere urge presidential candidates and federal legislators to make the \$25 billion plan a national priority, like previous efforts to protect the Everglades, Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon, he said.

U.S. Reps. Dale Kildee and Candice Miller of Michigan have stepped up and supported the plan, "but we need help from the White House," Lord said.

Barack Obama and John McCain have signed a pledge to fund the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration strategy, Lord said.

Legislation to implement the strategy has a price tag of \$23.5 billion, but has been broken into several parts that are working their way through Congress, said Andy Buchsbaum, director of the Great Lakes office of the National Wildlife Federation in Ann Arbor.

One of those pieces, called the Great Lakes Legacy Act, would spend \$750 million over five years to clean up toxic sediments, and may be voted on in the House and Senate as soon as September, Lord said.

The Earth Voyager will be in town until Saturday afternoon, when it leaves for similar events in Cleveland and Rochester, N.Y.

The sailboat is the flagship of the Friends of the St. Clair River Watershed, a nonprofit in Port Huron.

Austin's talk was presented by the Bay Area Community Foundation with support from the Dow Chemical Co., Consumers Energy and the Saginaw Bay Watershed Initiative Network.