

Spending bill boosts Great Lakes, border operations, other WNY priorities



Gulls rest on the sand at Woodlawn Beach State Park along Lake Erie in Blasdell Wednesday, September 23, 2020.

Mark Mulville

By Jerry Zremski
NEWS WASHINGTON BUREAU CHIEF

WASHINGTON – On Capitol Hill, they're called "Christmas trees," but these end-of-year, rush-out-the-door spending bills that Congress crafts would be better labeled "Santa's bags of toys," as they are chock full of gifts for states both blue and red.

The \$1.4 trillion bill that Congress rushed to passage this week should make this an especially Merry Christmas for anyone concerned with the Great Lakes or the goal of one day being able to go to Canada again.

The bill funds federal government operations through the end of the fiscal year on Sept. 30, 2021, and it includes items that will benefit the Great Lakes, as well as a measure that could eventually make cross-border travel easier.

Those line items, along with a surprise boost for the Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station secured by Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer, make the omnibus spending bill a win for Western New York, local lawmakers said.

Rep. Brian Higgins, a Buffalo Democrat who secured several of his priorities in the bill, credited his staff for locating the "pressure points" that resulted in local funding in the bill.

"We are very very fortunate to have very good staff – people who are very diligent and very idealistic – and I think their work manifests itself in success," Higgins said Tuesday.

Meanwhile, Rep. Tom Reed, a Corning Republican, said the spending bill "carries forward a tremendous number of priorities we fight for for the district day in and day out."

Lakes funding

Local advocates for the Great Lakes probably will find more to cheer in this week's acts of Congress than anyone else in Western New York.

The spending bill provides a 10% increase in funding for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, the decade-old effort that has already led to the cleanup of the Buffalo River and many other projects in communities bordering the lakes. The spending bill sets the coming year's funding for the program at \$330 million. Moreover, a separate bill that passed this week charts a course to boost funding for the program to \$475 million by 2026.

"This is tremendous news for the more than 30 million people who rely on the Great Lakes for their drinking water, health, jobs, recreation and quality of life," said Laura Rubin, director of the Healing Our Waters – Great Lakes Coalition.

That was just the start of the good news for the lakes. The bill sets aside \$4 million to study harmful algal blooms in Lake Erie, and separately includes Higgins' proposal to authorize the Army Corps of Engineers to begin an experimental effort to combat those water-contaminating outbreaks.

Overall, the Army Corps gets a \$145 million budget boost, enough to fund \$1.2 million in maintenance work at the Buffalo Harbor. Meanwhile, the Coast Guard received \$266 million for major construction projects, and Higgins' office expects some of that to be spent improving the agency's facilities along the Outer Harbor.

Residents of the Lake Ontario shoreline got good news in the bill as well. An effort led by Rep. Chris Jacobs, an Orchard Park Republican, resulted in \$1.7 million for an expedited study of Plan 2014, the International Joint Commission's controversial protocol for managing water levels on the Great Lakes. As a result, the bill could ultimately lead to relief for lakeshore property owners who have experienced severe flooding in recent years, Jacobs said.

A better border?

The spending bill also includes \$10 million to do something that's been talked about for years: modernizing the technology used at U.S. land border crossings such as the Peace Bridge.

It is unclear exactly how far that \$10 million will go, or whether it will eventually be used at the Peace Bridge or other local border crossings. But Higgins said the money was set aside in response to a study done several years ago that found U.S. border crossings saddled with old X-ray technology, poor internet connections and other tech-related anachronisms.

According to that study, "it really wasn't the physical capacity (at border crossings) that determined how efficient and timely the passage of inspections was," Higgins said. "It was more the lack of technology."

That technology investment was just part of the boost that U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the agency that staffs border crossings, got under the spending bill. The measure also sets aside \$100 million to replace aging Border Patrol stations – and the station in Niagara Falls is among those scheduled to be replaced.

A boost for Falls base

Every federal spending bill of this kind not only sets aside money for government agencies, but also instructs them on how they ought to go about their business.

And thanks to Schumer, a New York Democrat, this year's omnibus budget bill orders the Pentagon to prioritize taxiway repair projects at U.S. Air Force bases – and specifically names the Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station as a place where the taxiway needs to be improved.

That's hugely important to the Niagara Falls base, where the current taxiway is shorter than at some other bases and an awkward fit for Air Force refueling tankers. The base is home to the 914th Air Refueling Wing, which flies KC-135 Stratotankers.

The chairman of the Niagara Military Affairs Council, John Cooper, said the language in the bill is the first step in what will eventually be a \$60 million construction project that will keep the Niagara base competitive with other Air Force Reserve bases with refueling missions – and perhaps keep the base off any future base closure lists.

"Right now, we want to continue to grow that refueling mission, which is something that's very much needed within the Air Force," Cooper said.

Other items

The spending bill Congress finalized this week also contains a grab bag of other items that are of interest to Western New York.

For example, the measure:

- Sets aside \$3.8 billion for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance program – a \$10 million increase. President Trump repeatedly suggested eliminating the program, which serves about 70,000 Erie County families.
- Allocates \$3.5 billion to the Community Development Block Grant program, up \$50 million. Another target for elimination under Trump, the program brings about \$14 million to Buffalo annually to fund community programs.
- Includes \$88 million for the **West Valley Demonstration Project**, the Cattaraugus County nuclear cleanup site. A top priority of both Reed and Higgins, the project won a \$13 million funding increase.
- An unprecedented \$3.6 billion in funding for a rural broadband program that previously received only \$1.3 billion. Jacobs was among the House members pushing for that funding increase.

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– Some \$6 billion in funding for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, the same amount as in the previous spending bill. Sen. Kirsten E. Gillibrand, a New York Democrat, pushed to keep that funding steady.