

\$300M sought for state port

By Tim Smith

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COLUMBIA — Senate leaders say they support spending \$300 million out of the state budget now being debated to deepen Charleston's harbor, a move they believe will show the state is serious about its ports and help win back lost business.

State Ports Authority President and CEO Jim Newsome told members of the Senate Transportation Committee Wednesday that the port has tremendous potential if the state acts swiftly to deepen the harbor so it can attract the larger ships that will become more plentiful after expansion of the Panama Canal in 2014.

What happens to the port of Charleston is not just a focus of the Lowcountry. Upstate manufacturers, most notably BMW and Michelin, depend on the port for their business. The state last year led the nation in exports of vehicles and tires.

Senate Finance Com-

mittee Chairman Hugh Leatherman told GreenvilleOnline.com that he wants the money to come out of the budget for the fiscal year that begins in July but will look for it elsewhere if he has to because the need is "crucial."

"I think it's so important that this state shows the (U.S.) Corps of Engineers and the shipping world that we're serious about our ports," he said.

Leatherman said the money would be placed in a trust fund to be spent once officials are prepared to start the dredging.

"Then Jim Newsome could go throughout the world and tell shipping companies, 'You come on and sign on to our port because we've got the deepening covered,'" he said.

The House has included \$180 million for the deepening in its \$6.5 billion version of the General Fund budget that won key approval Wednesday.

Newsome said the total cost of deepening Charleston's harbor is about \$300 million. He said if Congress approves funding

for the project, the state's share would be about \$180 million.

But Leatherman and other senators said given the federal government's fiscal troubles and the need to demonstrate the state's commitment to its ports, lawmakers should try to fund the entire project now.

Searching for the deepening money comes as lawmakers are trying to decide what to do with about \$900 million in surplus funds. The \$300 million must compete with other budget needs, including employee pay raises, health-care and education funding, paying down state debt and helping businesses to pay for unemployment insurance costs.

Newsome told senators the port of Charleston, which ranked eighth largest in the nation last year for commerce, has fallen behind the port of Savannah in business.

"We have no time to waste," he said. "Deepening is a way to change the momentum."