



BRUCE SMITH / The Associated Press

Col. Jason A. Kirk, commander of the Charleston District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, left, and Jim Newsome, CEO of the State Ports Authority, sign agreement Monday.

Charleston Harbor study moves forward

Corps of Engineers funds lead to pact

By Bruce Smith
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHARLESTON — After months of political debate and maneuvering, an agreement was finally signed Monday allowing a study of deepening the Charleston Harbor shipping channel so it can handle the larger ships that will routinely call when the Panama Canal is widened in three years.

Several hundred people turned out at the South Carolina State Ports Authority passenger terminal as authority president and CEO Jim Newsome and Col. Jason Kirk of the Army Corps of Engineers signed the cost-sharing agreement.

Kirk said the agreement

means the corps can proceed with a study to determine whether deepening the harbor beyond its current 45 feet "is economically beneficial and environmentally acceptable to the nation."

Money for the study had been caught in the prolonged fight over congressional earmarks, the process by which lawmakers attach pet projects to federal spending bills. Republicans in South Carolina's congressional delegation generally opposed earmarks.

Last month, the Corps of Engineers allocated \$50,000 for the study during the remainder of the fiscal year at the end of September. That got the study on track and opened the way for Monday's cost-sharing agreement.

Such studies can take as long as eight years, although the corps said it hopes to complete the \$20 million

Charleston study in four. More money will have to be allocated in future years to pay for the study.

The work of deepening the channel to 50 feet is expected to cost another \$300 million.

Currently, the channel is 47 feet at the harbor entrance and 45 feet in the inner harbor at low tide. The channel had a depth of 35 feet in 1986, was deepened to 40 feet in 1994 and to 45 feet in 2004.

"The post 45-foot harbor deepening is one of the most vital projects in the future of the port and the thousands of companies that provide international trade," Newsome said.

U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said he would work with fellow Sen. Jim DeMint to develop a bill where harbor deepening projects are based on merit, not pressure from special interests.