

Charleston dredging plan gets push

By John P. McDermott
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An aggressive plan by South Carolina lawmakers to set aside \$180 million to deepen the Charleston shipping channel is sending a strong signal to the maritime industry and rival ports that the state is fully committed to the project, supporters said Thursday.

The budget proposal announced this week by members of the House Ways and Means Committee was described as "excellent news" by Bill Stern, chairman of the State Ports Authority.

"They're unified to move this forward," Stern said Thursday after he and

other SPA board members met in Charleston.

If the measure is approved, the money would go into a special reserve account and cover South Carolina's 60 percent portion of the \$300 million deepening project. The federal government would pay for the rest.

The amendment that would create the fund will likely be taken up on the House floor in about two weeks, said Barbara Melvin, the SPA's lobbyist. From there, it would move over to the state Senate and then to the governor, she said.

In a statement Thursday, Gov. Nikki Haley's office did not directly address the port reserve

fund, saying only that "while we may ultimately have our disagreements with the General Assembly over how to treat individual programs, she expects a responsible spending plan to arrive on her desk at the end of this process."

Harbor dredging, which is time-consuming and enormously expensive, has emerged as a crucial economic development issue.

The SPA and other major port operators are in a high-stakes race to deepen their waterways so they can accommodate the huge, heavy container ships that will become more common once a major expansion of the Panama Canal is completed in 2014.