Feds update Charlotte port project

BY BRUCE SMITH
ASSOCIATED PRESS

ISLE OF PALMS (AP) — A draft environmental impact study of the planned $300 million deepening of the Charleston Harbor shipping channel is expected in about 18 months, an Army Corps of Engineers official said Monday.

Lt. Col. Ed Chamberlayne, the district engineer for the Charleston District, told the South Carolina International Trade Conference that the corps has recently awarded nearly $2 million worth of contracts.

Deepening the channel from 45 feet to 50 feet would allow the Port of Charleston to handle the super-size container ships that will routinely call after the Panama Canal is expanded in 2014.

The corps announced this year that expedited studies could mean the project will be completed in 2020, instead of 2024 as originally projected. The Obama Administration has since designated the project as nationally significant, meaning another year could be shaved off the timetable.

Jim Newsome, the president and CEO of the South Carolina State Ports Authority, said deepening the nation's harbors is important in an era when container ships are getting bigger and bigger.

"We, as a country, have not prioritized this aspect of our infrastructure," he said, adding that researchers predict that by the end of 2015 - the first full year that an expanded Panama Canal is in operation, 52 percent of the world's container fleet will be made up of the larger, so-called post-Panamax vessels.

"The ability to handle these ships is really a game-changer for a port," he said.

"We think we're the best harbor in the Southeast for deepening," he said, noting that the Charleston project is expected to cost $300 million with about $30 million spent to mitigate environmental impacts. Deepening the Savannah River shipping channel to serve Georgia ports is expected to cost $650 million, with about $300 million spent on mitigation.

Upstate legislators have touted the port project as vital to local manufacturing, with all voting to spend $300 million for deepening in the last legislative session. State and local economic development officials point out that nearly 60 percent of the traffic through the Port of Charlotte either originates or ends with Upstate manufacturers.

A new inland port planned for Greer, near the BMW manufacturing site, will be linked by Norfolk Southern rail lines to the Seneca Rail Site on the old Propex property being developed by Seneca and Oconee County officials.

Retired Canal head talks expansion

ISLE OF PALMS (AP) — The recently retired head of the Panama Canal Authority says East Coast and Gulf ports will benefit most from expansion of the canal which should be fully operational in 2015.

Alberto Aleman Zubieta spoke Tuesday to the South Carolina International Trade Conference on the Isle of Palms.

He says work to deepen the canal and build larger locks continues around the clock. The canal is being expanded to handle larger container and other ships that will soon dominate world trade.

Zubieta says when the canal is completed, U.S. grain exports through the Gulf and East Coast will become more competitive, as will Gulf crude and natural gas from the nation's growing fracking industry.

U.S. ports are racing to deepen their harbors to handle the larger ships.