

Harbor study to move forward

Funding revives deepening hopes

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WASHINGTON — The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers said Wednesday it will provide a record \$2.5 million this year for a harbor-deepening study at the Port of Charleston.

The study, which the corps began last year, is expected to cost \$18 million to \$20 million, with half the money coming from Washington and the other half from the South Carolina Ports Authority.

The ports authority and South Carolina business groups say deepening the harbor from its current depth of 45 feet to 50 feet — a \$300 million project estimated to take at least four years once the study is completed — is critical to allow Charleston to accommodate giant cargo container ships around the clock once the Panama Canal is widened by 2014.

The corps' announce-

Port of Charleston

Charleston has a maintained harbor of 45 feet of depth at mean low tide throughout the main shipping channel and 47 feet in the entrance channel. A five to six foot tidal lift provides even deeper access for several hours during the day.



Chart illustrates Charleston's big ship handling capability. Vessel drafts and movement hours per day.

43 feet | 44 feet | 45 feet
24 hours | 18 hours | 14 hours

46 feet | 47 feet | 48 feet
10 hours | 6 hours | 2 hours

Source: South Carolina State Ports Authority

SUZIE RIDOLE/STAFF

ment marks a victory for the two senior members of the South Carolina congressional delegation, GOP Sen. Lindsey Graham and Assistant House Minority

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Leader Jim Clyburn, who worked behind the scenes to get last year's \$150,000 installment for the study and this year's \$2.5 million.

"We didn't have to twist arms or kick butts," Clyburn said. "We just made the case to the right people in this administration and we did it, as we continue to, away from public view. The competition for these monies is very stiff and you try not to signal too much ... what you're doing or when you're doing it."

The study, which may not be completed until 2016, was in jeopardy of not getting funded at all because of a congressional ban on special home-state projects, or earmarks, for the 2011-2012 legislative session.

House and Senate leaders adopted the ban mostly in response to pressure from conservatives such as Sen. Jim DeMint of South Carolina and tea party-backed House and Senate lawmakers elected in 2010.

Graham, a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, added language to a federal funding bill last year to secure money for projects with a demonstrable national and regional economic impact.

The Charleston port wouldn't have been the only beneficiary under Graham's proposal. That allowed it to circumvent the earmark ban, which applies to specific projects.

"These funds are being awarded under a more merit-based system," Graham said in a statement Wednesday. "We have always known that Charleston will fare well under that standard as harbor deepening is a worthwhile investment."

The Charleston port can accommodate giant "Panamax" ships that can carry more cargo than many other vessels — but only for a couple of hours a day during high tide, said Allison Skipper, spokeswoman for the South Carolina Ports Authority.

Deepening Charleston would make it competitive with other East Coast ports, she said. The port is used by companies in 20 states, from Florida to Indiana, she said.

"That's really the end goal here, to accommodate the new Panamax class on a non-tidally restricted basis," she said. "Four ports on the U.S. east coast today are authorized to 50 feet. The new Panama Canal is authorized to 50 feet."

The study will examine whether it's possible to deepen the Charleston harbor, how to do it in an environmentally sensitive way, and the project's economic impact.

The \$2.5 million is in addition to the approximately \$14 million the Port of Charleston receives from the Army Corps every year to maintain the harbor's depth and perform related maintenance.

Business groups applauded the corps' announcement and said deepening the harbor would boost the state's exports and help the region's economy.

"Harbor deepening is critical to the future of South Carolina, with businesses in all 46 counties of the state depending on the Charleston port on a daily basis," said Otis Rawl, president and CEO of the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce.

"Today's announcement is a great step in the right direction for South Carolina and the entire Southeast region."

Steve Evered, vice president of government affairs for Greenville-based Michelin North America, said Upstate manufacturers would particularly benefit.