BUSINESS

INLAND PORT PLAN ADVANCES

Proposed Greer rail project meant to support continued growth in container volume

By Bruce Smith
The Associated Press

CHARLESTON — With container volume growing as the economy recovers from the recession, the South Carolina State Ports Authority board agreed Tuesday to move forward with plans for an inland port.

President and CEO Jim Newsome was authorized to take any actions needed to build the port at a cost of up to $25 million. The money for the port, on land the agency owns near Greer, is already in the budget.

The port would be designed to more efficiently move containers and other goods by rail to Charleston. It's been estimated trains could eliminate 50,000 truck trips a year on busy Interstate 26 from the Greenville-Spartanburg area.

The board learned that cargo volume continues to improve as container volume increased 3.5 percent in the fiscal year that ended June 30. The numbers are even better for January to June this year, when container volume increased 7.4 percent. Last month, volume was up 16 percent over July of last year.

The board was also briefed on the progress during the past year on the planned $300 million deepening of the Charleston Harbor shipping channel.

Both the Corps of Engineers and the Obama administration have said federal reviews of the project will be expedited and the work could be completed by 2019, five years earlier than projected. The General Assembly also has set aside $300 million for the project — money that covers not just the state's $180 million share, but would cover construction of the entire project if needed.

The authority wants the 45-foot channel deepened to 50 feet to accommodate the larger container ships that routinely will be calling when the Panama Canal is enlarged in 2014. The board was also told that cargo volume at the Port of Georgetown almost doubled during the past fiscal year to 1.4 million tons, largely due to increases in cement shipments.

Newsome said total damage to the four cranes at the Wando Terminal in Mount Pleasant from a recent storm was $6 million. One of the cranes is back in service and two others will be on line by Sept. 21. The fourth, that suffered the most damage, could take nine months to repair.