Inland port considered for Upstate

By David Slade
The Post and Courier

The State Ports Authority is considering a plan to create an Upstate "South Carolina Inland Port" that could potentially extend the Port of Charleston's reach while taking trucks off of U.S. Interstate 26.

The SPA board will hold a special meeting Monday to consider a contract related to the plan, but has been silent on the details, including the specific location.

"All we're prepared to say at this point is that the S.C. Ports Authority board will consider a contract for an engineering study for an inland port in the Upstate region of South Carolina," said SPA Public Relations Manager Allison Skipper.

Sen. Larry Grooms, R-Bonneau, the chairman of the state's Port Oversight Commission, said he could not discuss details before the board meeting but that the inland port is a good idea and he hopes the authority moves forward with it.

"The ports authority does own the (potential inland port) property, which is not in Charleston," he said.

In the Upstate, the SPA's land holdings include more than 800 acres of land near Interstate 85 and the Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport, Spartanburg County land records show.

Some of that land is home to the BMW automobile plant, which ships vehicles to the Port of Charleston by rail, but much of the adjoining SPA land is undeveloped.

The airport, where a small number of shipping

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containers regularly arrive by air, has technically been an "inland port" since 1972, when it was designated as such by Gov. John West. The airport site is a U.S. Customs Port of Entry and a designated Foreign Trade Zone.

An inland port, in the sense the SPA is considering, is a terminal located sometimes hundreds of miles from the sea, where shipping containers can be transferred between trucks and trains. The Port of Virginia, for example, has an inland port located 220 miles from its shore-side terminals.

Inland ports give shippers a rail option for sending and receiving shipping containers — an option that's become important as industry associations warn of shortages of truck drivers.

According to the American Trucking Associations, there could be a shortfall of 111,000 drivers by 2014. An aging workforce and federal regulations limiting driver hours have been cited as causes.

The concept of a South Carolina inland port has been studied at least several times, and locations ranging from the Orangeburg area to the Spartanburg area have been proposed.

A 2002 state study questioned the economic benefits and concluded that ongoing subsidies would be required for an inland port.

South Carolina's 2008 statewide rail plan revisited the concept, and said potential benefits could include relieving road congestion, spurring economic development, and enhancing port competitiveness.

"Based on the analyses performed, an inland terminal in the Upstate provides the greatest proportional share of public benefits and it is also a location with a large concentration of Port customers," said the study by Columbia-based Wilbur Smith Associates.

The state's rail study described a potential Upstate inland port location as the area connected by interstates 85, 26 and 385. Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport sits on I-85 between the two other interstates, and the area is served by a Norfolk Southern rail line that BMW uses to ship automobiles to the Port of Charleston in specialized rail cars.

A 2004 study prepared for the Appalachian Regional Commission said that an Upstate inland port "by effectively moving the catchment area of the Port of Charleston westward, would bring the benefits of this international freight gateway directly into the Appalachian Region."

The study, prepared by Wilbur Smith Associates and the Rahall Transportation Institute at Marshall University, said that such a port would need to initially handle at least 20,000 shipping containers annually, would require about 180 acres of land, and could cost at least $26 million.

"If successfully implemented and operated, this cluster of transportation and logistics activity may serve to attract new commerce and employment into the area, similar to Virginia's success at their inland port," the study said.