Inland port planned in Greer

Hub will provides rail to truck option

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Plans by the South Carolina Ports Authority to build a new facility for handling shipping containers in Greer — a so-called "inland port" — could foster warehouse development and make the Upstate more attractive to manufacturers by giving them another option for bringing in raw materials or sending out finished goods, experts said.

Port officials said Monday they hoped to open the facility on about 50 acres near Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport sometime in the second half of next year. They've already included the estimated price tag of $23.5 million in their 2013 capital budget.

The inland port, similar to one in Port Royal, Va., would use special cranes to transfer shipping containers between trucks and trains.

It would enable the transporting of cargo between the port of Charleston and Greer by rail overnight, a distance of 220 miles.

The new service would help companies that employ "just in time" logistics, said Jimmy Newsome, chief executive of the Ports Authority.

He said the authority already has customers ready to use the facility though he didn't identify them.

Newsome said the new facility "needs" to open in the second half of 2013 "and the sooner the better."

The inland port will remove 25,000 tractor-trailer trips a year off of Interstate 26, and 50,000 over time, he said.

The Ports Authority board on Monday voted to negotiate an engineering contract as a first step toward developing the facility.

Newsome said the authority should employ no more than 25 people at the facility, but more jobs than that could result because of the potential to spur a new distribution complex in the Upstate.

"There are not many facilities in the interior of the United States that can ground load containers on this scale," he said.

Deepal Eliatamby, a Columbia engineering executive who heads the Transportation, Distribution and Logistics Council for the New Carolina economic development group, said manufacturers along the Interstate 85 corridor should be "chomp-

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ing at the bit" to have the additional option in shipping.

"While the Upstate does not have a waterfront like Charleston does, this essentially brings a component of the port along the I-85 corridor," he said.

Norfolk Southern Corp., the only railway that serves the site, said in a statement that it is engaged with the Ports Authority on the project and would be ready to comment further once the engineering is complete.

The ports authority said it bought 100 acres in Greer in 1982 with plans for an inland port, but the project never materialized.

Rick Todd, president of the South Carolina Trucking Association, said he's glad to see the port of Charleston become more competitive because that's good for the trucking industry.

Todd said he figures the inland port will help BMW get a better price on rail service and meet its corporate pollution-reduction goals by taking trucks off the road.

But the facility isn't likely to make a big difference for I-26 congestion, he said, because most truck traffic on the interstate isn't related to the port and most of the cargo the trucks are carrying can't be transferred to a train.

I-26 will still have to be improved, Todd said.

Newsome said he expects the truckers to embrace the project once they understand the potential it provides for deploying their assets more efficiently.

A BMW spokeswoman said the auto assembly plant near Greer will monitor the project and the opportunities it may present for the company.

Greenville-based Michelin North America and the Adidas warehouse in Spartanburg are two other Upstate companies that use the port of Charleston a lot.

Spartanburg businesswoman and Republican activist Karen Floyd, the only Upstate resident on the Ports Authority board, called the inland port a "tremendous coup for the Upstate of South Carolina" as well as the entire state.

Greer Mayor Rick Danner said the city is excited about the project even though it won't be inside city limits. The inland port is an economic development project "that would benefit the entire Greer community," he said.

Hal Johnson, president of the Upstate South Carolina Alliance, the regional economic development group, said the inland port is a great opportunity for South Carolina that should make the port of Charleston more competitive while also helping the Upstate's existing manufacturers and making the region more competitive in recruiting industry.