Port project made a priority

Charleston deepening could be done year earlier than estimated

By David Slade
The Post and Courier

South Carolina officials have been calling on Washington to make the proposed deepening of the Charleston Harbor a priority, and on Wednesday the White House responded with good news.

Charleston is among five ports whose infrastructure projects will be expedited, the Obama administration said, and that means the Port of Charleston could be deepened nearly a year earlier than the Army Corps of Engineers estimated just last week.

"The overarching message is that this is a priority project and it needs to move fast," said Jim Newsome, president and CEO of the State Ports Authority. "On the heels of last week's news, this is very good news."

The corps in Charleston said July 11 that studies of the harbor deepening plan could be finished by the summer of 2016, and the dredging could potentially be completed in 2020, four years ahead of previous esti-

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mates.

On Wednesday, the White House pledged that all federal reviews of the plan will be completed by September 2015 — 10 months earlier than the revised timeline the corps just announced.

The Obama administration's announcement caught local corps and State Ports Authority officials by surprise, but Newsome said any reduction in the timeline for deepening the port is good news, and Gov. Nikki Haley called it a huge leap forward for the state.

"This is a huge win for Charleston and for all of South Carolina," Haley said.

"Back in February, I stressed to the president how important deepening Charleston's port was and how frustrating the Army Corps' timetable was, and I'm thrilled to see the administration has sped up our project."

Port executives and elected officials had asked the White House to take action, after the corps initially said it could take eight years just to study the proposed deepening work.

The new deadline, combined with project-shortening measures announced earlier by the corps, means the harbor could potentially be deepened by 2019, five years earlier than once estimated.

The plan to dredge the harbor to 50 feet or more is aimed at accommodating larger container ships, which will be able to reach Southeast ports via the Panama Canal starting in 2015, after the canal is widened and deepened. Other U.S. ports are rushing to deepen waterways and raise bridges.

Charleston's nearest rival, the Port of Savannah, is on the president's list of initial projects to expedite, as are Jacksonville, Miami and the Port of New York and New Jersey.

The administration's move follows an executive order Obama issued in March, launching the streamlining initiative.

The White House has also announced the creation of a multi-agency Navigation Task Force that "will develop a federal strategy and coordinated decision-making principles that focus on the economic return of investments into coastal ports and related infrastructure to support the movement of commerce throughout the nation."

U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., has been pushing for a national mechanism for prioritizing port projects, and introduced legislation calling for the corps to rank the ports for funding. The Corps will be part of the new Navigation Task Force.

No details were announced, as to how the corps will finish the harbor study earlier than planned.

"With new guidance from the White House, we'll certainly do what's asked of us," said Sean McBride of the corps' Charleston district office.

Barbara Melvin, director of governmental relations at the SPA, said Wednesday's announcement suggests an additional federal commitment to getting the Charleston Harbor deepened, and that's a positive sign for federal funding.

In South Carolina, the General Assembly set aside a $300 million fund for the project just in case the federal government balks at providing a federal share.

"We've gone from looking for $150,000 to get the study started to 'we can't wait' in just two years," Melvin said.