

Port study moving ahead

Graham, Clyburn optimistic it will get started this year

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South Carolina lawmakers say they are close to clearing a big hurdle on their path to deepening the Charleston port, a \$300 million project they consider critical for creating jobs and a strong state economy.

"Through collaborative efforts, we've been able to convince the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for 2011 to include the Charleston study as part of their 2011 work plan," U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham told GreenvilleOnline.com Sunday.

"So it is now requested by the corps to the Office of Management and Budget, who have to give them the green light," he said.

The fiscal year ends Sept. 30, so what once was a \$350,000 study now will cost less because there won't be time to do much more than look at the project's feasibility, said Graham, a Seneca Republican.

It's crucial, however, because it is what the federal government will use to decide whether to share the cost of the next phase, a three-year \$15-to-\$18 million study on

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Charleston's port won't be able to handle the latest generation of ships unless a project to dredge the channel wins funding.

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how to deepen the port, Graham said. Without the cost-sharing pact, he said, the second study cannot go forward.

Graham said he believes the cost-sharing study will be funded in the next two or three weeks. His optimism prompted him to stop blocking Obama administration nominations, which he had done for three days last week after money for the study was not included in the compromise budget agreement between the administration and congressional leaders.

U.S. Rep. Jim Clyburn also expressed optimism.

Clyburn, the House Democrats' assistant leader, said he has received an encouraging update from the Obama administration on funding for a Charleston port study and hopes it will be in the Corps of Engineers' operating plan for the rest of the fiscal year.

"The indications that I have received from the vice president's office are very positive, and I look forward to having the funding for the Charleston port study resolved in the coming weeks," Clyburn said in a statement.

BMW, Michelin and other Upstate employers say a deeper harbor is critical to handle bigger ships that will sail to East Coast ports after the Panama Canal is widened in 2014.

If the funding request is

denied, Graham said, it will set the project back a year as state lawmakers try again to get a cost-sharing agreement with the federal government because money in one year's budget can't be put aside for something the next year.

A design study that would take a year or two would follow the three-year study, Graham said, then the actual widening. So there is no time to waste.

"If we don't show progress and we can't show shipping lines that we're going to be able to accept these super cargo ships 24-7, then they're not going to do business with us, and we're going to become noncompetitive," Graham said. "That's why I have been so insistent we don't lose a year."