Water bill would avoid Charleston deepening delay

ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHARLESTON — The new federal water resources bill will allow South Carolina to start deepening the Charleston Harbor shipping channel on its own without federal authorization, officials said Friday.

U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., joined Jim Newsome, the president and CEO of the South Carolina State Ports Authority, and John Litz, district engineer for the Charleston District of the Corps of Engineers, at a news conference on the long-awaited project.

Maritime interests want the channel deepened from its current 45 feet to 50 feet to handle larger container ships. The project is estimated to cost up to $350 million.

Both the U.S. House and Senate have passed versions of a new Resources Development Act. A conference committee, one of the members of which is U.S. Rep. Tom Rice from the state's 7th Congressional District, will work out the differences.

The Corps of Engineers is expected to issue a final report on deepening the Charleston channel in 2015. Under the water act, South Carolina could use its own money to start engineering and dredging without federal authorization.

The state could then be reimbursed later by the federal government. The General Assembly has already put aside $300 million for the deepening project.

In the past, once there was a positive report from the Corps, the project still had to be authorized by Congress and money approved, causing delays between the studies and construction.

"Allowing the state of South Carolina to forward the funds means we won't delay," Graham said. "So come September 2015 in the event there is no federal authorization to let Charleston get to 50 feet, we will, under this bill, allow South Carolina to go forward."

Newsome, who hopes to have the channel deepened by the end of the decade, said the provision is important.

"Without the water resources we could be all dressed up with nowhere to go," he said.

Graham said moving smoothly from study to construction is important in attracting port customers.

"If we start and stop it's going to cost us contracts," he warned. "Nobody is going to do a contract with a port if they don't know how this move ends."

Rice said in a statement he is pleased to be on the conference committee.

"I have made it my goal to do whatever it takes to champion South Carolina's ports," he said. "I am proud the House overwhelming passed this reform-focused legislation because it gives our nation's infrastructure_including the Georgetown Port_the attention it needs."

Rice got a provision inserted in the bill that, for the next two fiscal years, 10 percent of Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund expenditures will be for ports like Georgetown handling less than 1 million tons of cargo annually. Currently, such smaller ports can't get the money.

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