

Corbett to release \$15 million to continue deepening of Delaware River shipping canal

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To continue the 103-mile deepening of the Delaware River shipping channel, Gov. Corbett announced Wednesday that Pennsylvania would immediately release \$15 million to dredge the next four- to five-mile stretch of the river.

As the project's local sponsor, Pennsylvania footed the \$30 million cost of deepening to 45 feet, from 40 feet, the first 13-mile section of channel last year.

The federal government, which is supposed to pay two-thirds of the \$300 million tab, has to date ponied up about \$4 million for construction.

Now a push is under way to coordinate Pennsylvania and Delaware congressional leaders, the business community, and port interests to persuade the Army Corps of Engineers to "reprogram" unallocated funds from the corps' budget.

Appeals have also gone to Vice President Biden, who is from Delaware.

In a new development, Delaware, which originally sued to block the deepening, now publicly supports it to accommodate larger ships and commerce that will come to the East Coast from Asia after the Panama Canal is expanded in 2014.

The board chairman of the Port of Wilmington recently wrote the assistant secretary of the Army for civil works, urging her to fund the channel deepening as vital to growth at the Port of Wilmington.

"The [Delaware] governor has concluded that the project should proceed as planned," Alan Levin wrote Jo-ellen Darcy, the assistant secretary of the Army. "Federal funds must be included in the President's fiscal year 2012 budget."

President Obama did not allocate money for the project in his fiscal 2011 or fiscal 2012 budgets.

"Our effort will be to convince him that he needs to put it in there, and it's political," said Dennis Rochford, president of the Maritime Exchange for the Delaware River and Bay, spearheading a multistate effort to secure federal money.

Obama will need Pennsylvania to win reelection, and "he's not going to carry this state" without the support of organized labor - the AFL-CIO, Teamsters, Building Trades, and other unions, Rochford said, after Corbett's news conference.

Flanked by port, business, and labor officials at Packer Avenue Marine Terminal, Corbett said the \$45 million from Pennsylvania would pay off in jobs. "It's as good for South Jersey as for Southeastern Pennsylvania," he said. "People work and live on both sides of the river."

"One estimate says that deepening the river channel will create 8,000 to 12,000 direct jobs, and indirectly contribute to another 38,000 jobs," Corbett said.

Former Sen. Arlen Specter, instrumental in getting the deepening authorized by Congress in 1992, said Wednesday that over the years \$77 million was appropriated, but when the deepening was delayed, the Army Corps "reprogrammed" \$55 million to other projects.

"We're still fighting to get that money back," Specter told the crowd.

Charles Kopp, chairman of the Philadelphia Regional Port Authority, said, "We have a chance of getting into the Army Corps' work plan for 2011, and getting into the 2012 and 2013 budgets."

Kopp, appointed to the port authority board by Corbett, said maritime officials had not yet asked for New Jersey's support because one court appeal remains in that state's effort to stop the project.

"When there are no legal impediments, then it's just a matter of politics in New Jersey," Kopp said. "And then the governor will probably talk to Christie and get that worked out."

The federal government is supposed to pay 65 percent, and Pennsylvania, 35 percent. The entire deepening, from Camden to the Atlantic Ocean, is expected to take five to seven years.

The \$15 million from Pennsylvania will dredge four to five miles of river, from just north of the Delaware Memorial Bridge up to Pedricktown, N.J. Work will begin this fall.

The next critical phase would require federal funds to blast rock near Chester and Marcus Hook.

Most major East Coast ports are already at 45 feet depth. The Port of New York and New Jersey is being deepened to 50 feet to allow for larger commercial ships.

Gov. Christie and other state politicians are not opposed to deepening the northern New Jersey and New York harbor.

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