

Costly bids under review for dredging project

(Photo: Chuck Snyder/The News Journal)

Story Highlights

- The Army Corps of Engineers is weighing the longest and most-costly per mile bids yet for the 103-mile Delaware River main channel
- The bids total \$95 million
- If approved, the two contracts would push total dredging awards since the start of construction in 2010 to about \$184 million, with costs for all phases of the project estimated at \$334 million



The Army Corps of Engineers is weighing the longest and most-costly per mile bids yet for the 103-mile Delaware River main channel deepening project, including a 17-mile stretch that will supply sand to widen and protect vulnerable Broadkill Beach northeast of Milton.

Two offers, totaling about \$95 million, await final reviews before the winning contractors get a go-ahead, said Edward Voigt, spokesman for the Army Corps of Engineers Philadelphia District office. Corps officials still expect the entire project, which will deepen the channel to 45 feet from its present 40 foot depth between Philadelphia and the sea, to wind up by 2017.

New Jersey-based Weeks Marine Inc. bid about \$70 million to deepen the southernmost, 17-mile stretch of Delaware Bay shipping channel, with work to start in September and continue as late as April 2016. Weeks' offer was the lowest of four bids that ranged to greater than \$90 million.

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Illinois-based Great Lakes Dredge & Dock separately submitted a tentatively winning \$25 million bid for a 2.5 mile stretch of deepening between the Ben Franklin and Walt Whitman bridges in Philadelphia. If approved, the two contracts would push total dredging awards since the start of construction in 2010 to about \$184 million, with costs for all phases of the project estimated at \$334 million.

A contract solicitation for the southernmost stretch in July failed to attract bidders, prompting surprised officials to rework timetables and work requirements to give more time and flexibility on the water. The concessions included waiving horseshoe crab spawning work restrictions during 2015.

Dredging costs have jumped since the project began, as the recession eased and as repair work demands after Hurricane Sandy's passage increased competition for equipment and crews. Costs for dredging in Delaware Bay ranged as low as \$1.3 million per mile for early contracts, but were more than \$4.5 million per mile for a project north of Marcus Hook and the southernmost section. Work in the narrower stretch between the Ben Franklin and Walt Whitman bridges will cost about \$10 million per mile if approved by the Corps.

James Bailey, president of the Broadkill Beach Preservation Association, said he remains optimistic that the latest contracts will wrap up in time to protect hundreds of homes in his community from another destructive storm.

"We always figured it would be starting in the fall or winter, and just have to keep hoping for the best and hoping for no hurricanes," Bailey said.

Anthony Pratt, shoreline and waterways manager for Delaware's Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control, said last week's multi-day storm washed out most of the sand trucked into Broadkill Beach in recent months to protect its most-vulnerable areas. Some of that sand, deposited just offshore, will likely move back onshore elsewhere, he said.

For now, parts of the shoreline fronting some Broadkill Beach homes have nearly disappeared, with tides sending waves and water underneath and around a few houses almost daily, and over-washing entire streets when strong storms hit.

Crews using floating, bathtub-like "hopper" dredges will deliver 1.9 million cubic yards of sand to Broadkill in the coming months, spreading it along a 15,000 foot stretch to create a 100-foot wide buffer up to 8 feet above the water, topped at its land-side edge by an 8-foot-high protective dune. Once finished, the Corps would replenish the shoreline periodically over 50 years.

Bailey said that flooding from thousands of acres of saltwater marshland west of Broadkill Beach also remains a threat, both for his community and for the Prime Hook Beach development and town of Slaughter Beach to the north. But Interior Department efforts to close off shoreline breaches that cause the marsh flooding could ease that threat in the future.

About 30 miles of work remains for the Corps' deepening project, including more than 20 miles of bay bottom east of Kent County and more than 10 miles straddling the river at the Delaware border. That work will include rock-blasting on the riverbottom near Marcus Hook, Pa.

Congress authorized the Corps to prepare deepening plans in 1992, but years of studies, public debate and court battles blocked the start of work until 2010.

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