

Corps to bid out dredging projects soon

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Chesapeake City's basin may finally be dredged this year after all stakeholders recently reported progress in permitting and funding.

FILE PHOTO

CHESAPEAKE CITY — After two years of waiting, it seems boaters may finally have something to celebrate as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is preparing bid documents for dredging in the Back Creek Basin and near the C&D Canal.

Gavin Kaiser, the Corps' C&D Canal project manager, told the Whig on Friday that the Corps' Philadelphia District office's contracting office was currently finishing work on the documents to be put to bid, and he hoped to publish both by the end of August with tentative awarding of a contract before the end of September.

The Corps is prepared to fund the costs of the dredging of its property within the basin as well as an approach area at its mouth, but its fiscal year closes out Oct. 1, meaning that the federal agency is in a race against the clock to get the project bid and awarded before then.

If it doesn't get finished before October, the projects would have to be reassessed as part of the federal government's fiscal year 2018 budget. While not a death sentence, considering the debate in Washington over spending priorities, work could be further delayed while the prime dredging season runs from October to March.

"I'm confident that it's going to get done, it's just a matter of when the work occurs after it has been awarded," Kaiser said, explaining that as long as a project has been awarded it could begin at any time.

Kaiser said his office understands the concerns of Chesapeake City town officials and business owners in getting the dredging completed, calling it a "priority." He noted that if the Corps ran into any unexpected issues late in the bidding process, his office has been exploring different budgetary mechanisms that could help push the project's awarding before the Oct. 1 deadline.

After it was last dredged in 2010, the roughly 1,500-foot-wide basin had a maximum depth of 10 to 12 feet, but now parts of the basin are as shallow as 4 feet at low tide. Gianmarco Martuscelli, owner of the Chesapeake Inn Marina and Restaurant, said water taxis brought in some guests from boats anchored farther out in deeper areas last season, but it's not an ideal solution for his establishment. Without dredging this summer, the Chesapeake Inn has had to find proper accommodations for boats with larger drafts while also navigating the tides to avoid stranding a vessel.

"We've heard it all summer from the big boats who don't want to chance coming in the basin," Martuscelli said Tuesday. "That causes a ripple effect, because a lot of those boats are wealthier and they're likely to spend the night in town, patronizing other shops."

Kaiser intends to fund the Corps' portion of the project, which would include the entire area of the basin owned by the Corps and possibly some small areas in the canal adjacent to the basin's mouth, using federal funds in his fiscal year 2017 budget. That means that a \$620,000 grant from the Maryland Department of Natural Resources Waterway Improvement Fund, obtained by the town this year as a failsafe funding source, may not now be needed.

The town secured a \$100,000 grant from the same fund last year to pay for its dredging of town docks and Martuscelli has reported that his business was prepared to pay its roughly \$60,000 portion. Both will piggyback off of the contract of the bidder chosen by the Corps, which will bear the mobilization costs of the project, Kaiser noted.

Meanwhile, Martuscelli said he's already met one such potential bidder who's come to his restaurant for an up-close inspection of the impending project, a reassuring sign that the often behind-the-scenes work was making progress.

"If they end up doing it in October and November that would be perfect, because earlier would probably impact us even more," Martuscelli said, explaining that most boaters store their vessels away by mid-October. "I'm glad to hear we're a step closer. It needs to be addressed immediately."

Already in hand for the Back Creek Basin work is the Corps' water quality certificate, allowing the Corps to dispose of dredge spoils at its Bethel site, behind its Chesapeake City office.

The larger, more routine dredging of the southern channels leading large ships in and out of the C&D Canal toward the Port of Baltimore and other destinations is also making headway. Kaiser said he expects that project to also be put to bid and awarded before Oct. 1 as well.

The Corps has been hard at work resolving water contamination issues at the Pearce Creek Dredge Material Containment Field in Earleville, where it intends to place this winter's dredge spoils. After federal tests found that naturally-occurring metals were seeping down into water tables that serve nearby residents, the Maryland Department of the Environment refused to issue water quality certificates for dredging projects using that DMCF.

With dwindling capacity at other disposal sites, however, the Corps needed to reopen the Pearce Site DMCF and worked for years to clear the land, put down a synthetic liner and cover the site to prevent future leaking. It also cooperated with a Maryland Port Authority-funded project to run a public water service line from Cecilton to the communities, which is currently hooking up homes after years of work there.

Kaiser reported in a meeting with stakeholders last week that the liner is completed and monitoring wells have been installed in the DMCF, putting the Corps on track to dispose of spoils at the Pearce Creek site for the first time in 20 years.