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Port Freeport receives first piece of federal funding for harbor project

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A color-coded map shows the varying widening and deepening plans as part of the Freeport Harbor Channel Improvement Project.

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FREEPORT — The first piece of federal funding for the Freeport Harbor Channel Improvement Project, a longtime initiative of the port, was announced by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers during its 2020 work plan, according to a news release from the port.

The \$19 million is the first portion of the previously approved \$165 million of federal funding, Port Freeport spokeswoman Lauren McCormick said.

“Whenever the appropriations are made (to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers), the different projects throughout the country still have to compete for federal funding even though it’s an approved project,” McCormick said.

Port Freeport was one of two seaports nationwide to receive the “new start” designation for commencement of construction with the funds, according to the news release.

The funding is in addition to a \$130 million voter-approved bond for the project, which passed in 2018. The total project is estimated at \$295 million and will take about five years to complete, McCormick said.

The project will deepen and widen parts of the channel, including depths ranging between 51 feet and 56 feet, McCormick said.

“A deeper channel and navigation improvements will allow the Freeport Harbor Channel to support the growing energy exports and need for more efficient transits using deeper draft vessels achieving greater economies of scale for our port and channel partners,” Port Freeport Executive Director and CEO Phyllis Saathoff said.

After a feasibility study was conducted in 2003, the port received congressional approval in 2014 for the improvement project, according to the news release.

“We can all take great pride in the fact that this project will provide significant benefits to this region, the state and nation for decades to come,” Port Chairman Shane Pirtle said.

The next step is to enter into a project partnership agreement with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which should take about 90 days, and accelerate the use of the federal funding, a news release states.

The first phase of the project should be completed within months after designs and engineering are finished, according to the news release.

“The significant economic return of the Freeport Harbor Channel Improvement Project and the increase in energy exports played a key role in the project receiving construction funding in the FY2020 work plan,” Saathoff said in an email. “We are grateful to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

for their attention to the project, industry partners for their support, as well as to the voters of the Port Freeport Navigation District who played a key role in getting the (project) to the point it is today.”

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