



Town of Fairfield

Office of the First Selectwoman
Brenda L. Kupchick

PRESS RELEASE

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FAIRFIELD HARBOR MANAGEMENT COMMISSION ISSUES STATUS REPORT ON SOUTHPORT HARBOR DREDGING PLANS AND CHALLENGES

While the journey has its challenges, there's been progress towards the goal of dredging and removing the sandy sediment building up on the eastern shore of the entrance channel of Southport Harbor, an increasing concern to boat owners, according to a statement issued today by the Fairfield Harbor Management Commission (FHMC).



More than 200 sail and power boats are docked, moored or stored in Southport Harbor. During good weather and optimal tides, dozens of additional boats enter and exit Southport Harbor each week using the boat launch ramp at Ye Yacht Yard marina at the end of Harbor Road. Visiting vessels also enter the scenic harbor destination on weekends and holidays during the boating season.

“We know unfortunately that many of these people have to be concerned about running aground in the harbor where at low tide the channel has narrowed from 100 feet to less than 50 feet and, in some places, only five feet of depth can be found,” said Kim Taylor, Chair of the FHMC.

Taylor said that after attending a November meeting with the Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE), which by law has direct responsibility for the work, it appears that the start of dredging of the channel and restoring it to its original 100-foot width and its depth of nine feet will be sometime in or about January 2024.

Maintenance dredging has been delayed in recent years by lack of federal funds, but earlier this year, the ACOE informed the FHMC that Southport Harbor is now included on the list of dredging projects that will receive funding through the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2022. As a result, project planning has resumed in earnest.

The Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) is also involved in the process. It must review ACOE plans for managing sand dredged from the harbor before it grants permission to proceed. The ACOE's timetable for submitting final plans for DEEP review is uncertain, Taylor said.

Dredging in Southport Harbor was last accomplished by the ACOE in 2004-2005. The Fairfield Department of Public Works later excavated sand from the shoal near the entrance channel in 2014-2015 using the sand to nourish town beaches.

Records show, however, that maintenance of the harbor's navigation channel has historically long been difficult and a matter of community concern. According to an 1838 ACOE report, teams of oxen hauling road scrapers entered two-foot-deep harbor water at low tide to help keep the channel navigable for various size commercial vessels carrying cargoes of onions, other produce and manufactured goods to market. The jetty extending out southerly from the beach into the Long Island Sound on the eastern side of the entrance was authorized in 1829 by the U.S. Congress to slow the westerly drift of sand into the commercially vital Southport Harbor shipping channel.



“While we don’t use oxen any longer and the planned dredging project’s estimated cost, exceeding \$1 million, is now fully funded from dedicated federal budgets, there are several other regulatory, environmental and logistical issues which have to be resolved,” according to Bryan LeClerc, the Southport Harbor Master appointed by Gov.

Lamont. LeClerc is also an ex-officio member of the FHMC which, since 1986, has principal day-to-day responsibility for guiding the harbor's beneficial use and conservation.

Specifically, according to LeClerc, the much in demand dredging vessel operated by the ACOE is needed for this project. The ship, a hopper dredge, is in high demand up and down the East Coast. Southport Harbor is just one location on the waiting list.

"The dredging process is inherently complex and lengthy. It includes many regulatory and funding hurdles and has been that way for years. We're all committed to maintaining safe and efficient navigation and to do so in an environmentally sound way that will make use of the sandy dredged material for beneficial purposes," said Geoffrey Steadman, a consultant to the FHMC. Current plans, he said, prepared in consultation with the state Bureau of Aquaculture and Fairfield Shellfish Commission call for placement of the sandy dredged material in a designated offshore location where it will improve shellfish habitat.

One separate environmental question that was raised early in the planning process has since been resolved. There were concerns by some that dredging the harbor entrance channel would negatively impact the habitat for Piping Plovers, a protected species, that once were observed in small numbers on the sandy bank along the eastern side of the channel. Studies for FHMC conducted by the Connecticut Audubon Society, which concluded this year, found that the Piping Plovers have not nested in that area for more than ten years and the habitat was not attractive for them.

For a helpful, illustrated presentation summarizing "Southport Harbor's Past, Present and Future" plus other relevant harbor information, people are asked to consult the Harbor Management Commission News section of the Town's website:

<https://www.fairfieldct.org/hmc>.

First Selectwoman Brenda Kupchick added, "While the dredging planning and environmental approval process takes longer than all of us would like, the result will ultimately be a safe, navigable Southport Harbor achieved in an ecologically balanced manner. That's something all of us will be able to enjoy whether we're on the water or along the shoreline of this exquisite town treasure. I am grateful to all the volunteers and professionals who are working so hard to get dredging started."

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