

Year round harbor dredging is near ✓

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SANTA CRUZ — Port District officials finally have some good news from the federal government about dredging of the sand-clogged Small Craft Harbor.

The Army Corps of Engineers is willing to pay 80 percent of the cost of new sand dredging equipment to be owned and oper-

ated year round by the the Port District.

There are still some hitches and more negotiations to come, but harbor officials see the decision as a breakthrough.

Currently the Army Corps handles the dredging and that has proved unsatisfactory because the harbor mouth is closed an average of four months each year.

Ever since the harbor was built by the Army Corps 20 years ago, constant problems with shoaling in the mouth have plagued boaters, rescue crews and commissioners.

Not only has the shoaling been a thorn in the side of fishermen and pleasure cruisers unable to sail into Monterey Bay when the mouth is closed, but also a safety hazard.

Harbormaster Steve Scheiblaue said there have been three drownings in the past ten years from boats capsized due to the conditions of the mouth.

Over the same period, about 150 boats have been severely damaged and two harbor patrol boats were ruined.

Commissioners voted unanimously Friday to pay the remaining 20 percent, or up to \$400,000, of the cost of the dredge with some conditions. The federal government's 80-percent share amounts to up to \$1.6 million.

"There's no question this is an opportunity we've been waiting for. We're excited," said Commission Chairman Alan Simpkins on Saturday.

Scheiblaue said the Port District now has a chance "to control our own destiny."

But with the good news comes the bad news that boat slip rental fees will most likely be increased to finance the dredge purchase.

There is a proposal before the Commission to hike fees from \$2.74 to \$3.45 per foot.

But, even if the fees are increased, they will be lower than the average \$3.62 fee charged in the region, said Scheiblaue.

Scheiblaue thinks the boaters "are willing to come forward" and support the purchase of the dredge.

Boaters have been particularly anxious this year to sail their boats out of the harbor due to the good weather.

The past two years, by contrast, were such bad-weather years that boaters were not as upset by the clogged harbormouth. If the mouth had been clear, they probably would have stayed home anyway due to the storms.

Simpkins said, "We feel we can do the job for about half the cost that the Corps was doing it."

This year's dredging project cost \$580,000 to dredge twice.

In 1981, federal officials cut the dredging program in half — from dredging four times to only two times per year.

Simpkins said if the deal goes through, it would probably not be until the winter of 1985 that District officials would realize their dream of having their own dredge stationed all-year-round at the harbor.

Commissioners offered to pay 20 percent only on the condition the Corps continue to dredge four times per year until the District dredge is in place.

The District also wants to have the right to obtain additional money in case unforeseen problems occur.

Under terms of the District's offer, the Corps would still be responsible for sealing the east jetty so that sand does not

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continue to filter from the beach through the jetty into the harbor mouth.

The jetties would remain the responsibility of the Corps.

Commissioner Bill Lee and Port District Manager Brian Foss took the District's case to Washington D.C. recently and met with Congressmembers, President Reagan's staff and top Corps officials.

The Corps had made a decision not to keep a permanent dredge at the harbor mouth after an embarrassing incident for federal officials in 1970.

That year, the dredge arrived in the middle of a winter storm, took on water

and almost sank. "It was a real catastrophe," said Scheiblaue.

In 1979, District officials had failed to convince federal officials to enter a cost-sharing agreement for the District to buy the dredge.

A major problem is the position of the harbor near the mouth of the San Lorenzo River. Sand from the river mouth washes into the harbor and builds up, making a shallow bottom.

The harbor mouth was only one-foot deep last month at low tide. The shallowness made it impossible for the harbor patrol boat to help in efforts to rescue a man lost in Monterey Bay in a flimsy raft.

The man is presumed drowned.