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Key committee OKs harbor improvements

\$330 million Weld plan will aid New Bedford, Fall River ports

By Dan Ring
Ottaway News Service

BOSTON — A key legislative committee Thursday approved Gov. William F. Weld's \$330 million plan to improve depressed seaports such as New Bedford and Fall River and help the beleaguered fishing industry.

Rep. William Straus, D-Mattapoisett, a member of the Transportation Committee, said the plan includes money to dredge the channel in New Bedford that runs from the Hurricane Barrier north to the Fairhaven-New Bedford Bridge.

The channel, which was last dredged in 1854, is being filled in by silt. For New Bedford to prosper as a commercial port for international trade, dredging is needed, Rep. Straus said.

"Overall, this bill will really give a chance for the state to focus on coastal communities as economic resources necessary for the growth of the state," Rep. Straus said after the Transportation Committee voted unanimously to pass the legislation.

Gov. Weld's plan contains \$45 million for improvements to

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piers in the state's 12 largest ports, including Fall River and New Bedford.

The legislation also has \$100 million for covering the state's share of dredging costs in various harbors.

Supporters in the New Bedford area said a deeper channel is needed in New Bedford to accommodate passenger ships that might arrive in the city if the state approves a casino planned by the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head.

The channel also needs to be dredged to attract larger vessels to ship-repair yards in New Bedford and Fairhaven, they said.

Backers also pointed out that some vessels now are being forced to ship to New Bedford with lighter cargo because the channel is only 26 feet deep in some parts.

In addition, the seaport bond bill includes:
\$500,000 to develop fish hatcheries, aquaculture and other fishing initiatives.

\$4 million to establish fish-display auctions and a comprehensive plan to save the state's struggling commercial fishing industry.

\$500,000 to study the state's needs in marine transport of

\$250,000 for UMass Dartmouth to develop a center for maritime safety.

Rep. Thomas Cahir, D-Bourne, who took over as House transportation chair in January, also revised the legislation to earmark \$6.5 million to build a 341-foot-long boardwalk for fishing at the Massachusetts Maritime Academy.

The money will also be used to expand the state pier at the west end of the Cape Cod Canal next to the academy.

Rep. Cahir likewise added \$10,000 for training of harbor masters, \$5 million for dredging of smaller ports and harbors and \$20 million for renovating public piers and wharves in smaller communities like Marlon, Mattapoisett, Wareham, Dartmouth and Westport.

Rep. Cahir also wants to use the package to change state law to reduce a town's mandated share of costs under a state program to repair municipal piers and harbor facilities.

"It's an exciting piece of legislation," Rep. Cahir said. "All aspects of the bill clearly have economic benefits. That's what was fun about the bill."

Ralph Cox, maritime director for the Massachusetts Port Authority, cheered the approval of the bill, saying that the initiative shows the importance of seaports to the state's economy.

Rep. Cahir said the seaport bond bill is moving extraordinarily fast considering that Gov. Weld introduced the legislation in January.

Rep. Cahir predicted that it could be approved by the House sometime this summer.

The bill would also need to be passed by the Senate and then signed into law by Gov. Weld.

The governor would also need to authorize approval of the projects.