COUNTY OF YORK
MEMORANDUM

DATE: December 19, 2024

TO: York County Board of Supervisors

FROM: Mark L. Bellamy, Jr., County Administrator

SUBJECT: Back Creek Dredging Project Overview

Background

In 2016, a significant shoaling problem was identified in the entrance channel to Back Creek, which poses a navigation hazard for commercial and recreational vessels. This channel serves 17 different corporate entities involved in commercial fishing, which represent over 200 direct local jobs within the community, as well as significant support and service-related employment throughout the region. Upon identification of this critical issue, York County made a request to the Army Corps of Engineers to investigate the problem under its Continuing Authorities Program, Navigation Improvements (Section 107 of the River and Harbor Act of 1960, as amended). Section 107 of the River and Harbor Act of 1960 provides authority for the Army Corps of Engineers to improve navigation, including dredging of channels, anchorage areas, and turning basins, and construction of breakwaters, jetties, and groins through a partnership with non-federal government sponsors such as cities, counties, special-charter authorities, or units of state government.

From this request, a feasibility study was performed, which determined that a proposed channel dredging project would meet the requirements for federal participation. Once this determination was made, a Detailed Project Report (DPR) was executed at a cost of $697,253, a portion of which was funded by the York County Economic Development Authority.

The following information is outlined in the DPR:

Purpose

The purpose of the initial feasibility study was to evaluate alternative navigation improvements in the Back Creek Channel, including approach and turning basins, and to recommend an alternative plan for design and implementation to address the problem. The selected plan will mitigate the hazard to navigation posed by significant shoaling that has accumulated in the channel.

Need

The navigation problem identified in the Back Creek Channel can be characterized as a lack of opportunity for reliable and efficient movement of commercial and recreational vessels along the entrance channel to Back Creek. Groundings, economic damages,

congestion, transportation delays and reduced cargo loading are a result of the shallow depths in the channel.

Objectives

- Reduce damages and economic losses to commercial and recreational vessels caused by groundings, which are a result of shoaling, in the Back Creek Channel over the period of analysis from 2026 – 2075.
- Construct and maintain a reliable, efficient, and environmentally sustainable navigation channel.
- Reduce operational inefficiencies and congestion in the Back Creek Channel.
- Improve the safety of commercial and recreational vessels traversing the Back Creek Channel by providing unrestricted navigation.

Current Conditions

Safety Issues – Commercial and recreational boats cannot safely traverse the channel during low tides as the shallow depths represent a hazard to navigation.

Groundings – Historically occur annually, with two occurring in 2022. The most significant and expensive grounding was experienced by the fishing vessel Carolina Queen in 2016, where the vessel was grounded for an extended period of time, with recovery and repair costs totaling over $1 million.

Time Delays – With the channel's shallow depths, vessels must wait for a high tide, which can result in delays of over six (6) hours.

Environmental Spill Risk – Potential oil spills could occur during grounding, impacting nearby marshlands, biological species, water quality, and human safety.

Economic Loss – Ripple-effects from vessel delays resulting from shoaling include impacts to shipping agencies, truck delays, catch spoilage, and extended time to market. More significantly, Seaford Scallop Company has alerted County staff that if the shoaling issue is not addressed, the company will have to relocate to New Jersey to make continued operations sustainable. This would result in a loss of $21 million annually in catch being processed through Virginia.

Tentatively Selected Plan

As part of the DPR, a tentative plan of action was selected from 13 project alternatives. Benefits and costs were evaluated for all project alternatives, revealing Alternative 7 as having the highest net average annual benefits. The Alternative 7 project plan would feature a dredging to reestablish a channel that is 12,641 feet long, 60 feet wide (one-way traffic), and -16 feet Mean Lower Low Water (MLLW) depth, in addition to a turning basin of 900 feet in length (included in total channel length) and 250-300 feet wide. The dredging of the channel and creation of a turning basin will produce approximately 239,432 cubic yards of dredge material, which will be placed at the Norfolk Offshore Disposal Site (NODS). Future maintenance of the channel and basin will be coordinated by the Army Corps of Engineers every 7 – 10 years.

The total project cost (fully funded) of the tentatively selected plan is $5,804,000. Overall, this is cost-shared at 80% federal and 20% non-federal, which is approximately $4,643,000

and $1,161,000, respectively. As it applies in this case, Seaford Scallop Company has agreed to pay the non-federal cost-share portion. There is a potential for Seaford Scallop Company's cost-share portion to be covered by State funding, as Senator Diggs has requested funding in the upcoming State budget to cover the non-federal cost-share portion.

Public Review

As part of the DPR, there was a public review period which spanned from August 30, 2024 to September 30, 2024. On September 18, 2024 there was an in-person public engagement session at the Yorktown Library, with representatives from the Army Corps of Engineers, County staff, and Seaford Scallop Company.

Next Steps

As of November 20, 2024, the final DPR was submitted and approval of the report is expected by February 12, 2025. Upon approval of the DPR, coordination and mobilization of the project will commence. The actual dredging of the channel and establishment of the turning basin is estimated to take approximately one month to complete.

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