https://www.postandcourier.com/business/charleston-union-pier-sc-ports-beemok-shipping-lane/article_26a5f794-981e-4a91-96ca-d2fa672df339.html

Redevelopment of Charleston's Union Pier could hobble shipping lane, harbor users say

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The federally maintained 0.7-mile Tidewater Reach navigation channel hugs the east side of the Charleston peninsula, roughly between Waterfront Park (center, right) and the north end of Union Pier Terminal (center).

FILE/ROBERT BEHRE/STAFF

The maritime industry is sounding alarm bells about the future of a small commercial shipping lane in Charleston Harbor once the State Ports Authority finalizes **the $250 million sale of Union Pier Terminal**.

With little public notice, a passage in a congressional bill would permanently “deauthorize” the working waterway known as Tidewater Reach, meaning the federal government would no longer be responsible for maintaining the width and depth.

The provision, announced by U.S. Rep. Nancy Mace, is part of the proposed 2026 Water Resource Development Act, which Congress updates every two years. If the bill is passed, the change will take effect when S.C. Ports sells Union Pier to Marti Holdings LLC.

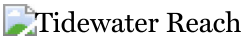
“This will allow for the future redevelopment of the area by a private developer,” according to a July 14 statement from Mace’s office, which didn’t respond to a request for comment.

The Charleston Area Harbor Safety Committee is looking to stall the process, though it’s unclear what it can do this late in the game. Earlier this month, the group asked the Coast Guard to conduct a formal safety assessment of the channel before the government relinquishes control. It also requested that the width and depth remain at a minimum of 650 feet and 24 feet, respectively.

“Tidewater Reach remains an important component of Charleston Harbor's navigation system,” according to the committee’s petition.

Reaches, bends & basins

The unmarked channel is one of 28 reaches, bends or turning basins monitored by the Army Corps of Engineers, stretching from Fort Sumter to the Naval Weapons Station up the Cooper River.



The Army Corps of Engineers identifies more than two dozen navigable shipping channels in Charleston Harbor, from the area near Fort Sumter to the Naval Weapons Station in Berkeley County.

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Tidewater runs about seven-tenths of mile along the east side of the southern peninsula, roughly between Waterfront Park and the north end of Union Pier, and serves as a link between the upper and lower sections of the harbor.

By one estimate, as many as 5,000 shallow-draft boats and working watercraft, including smaller tugs and fuel barges, use the reach annually. The channel also helped **cruise ships** navigate their way to Union Pier until the last call in late June.

“Its continued availability keeps smaller commercial vessels out of the deep-water channels designed for Charleston's largest ships, provides navigational redundancy and supports essential marine services,” the harbor committee told the Coast Guard.

Safety and logistics are two top concerns.

“Eliminating the channel would divert smaller vessels into the eastern deep-water channel, increasing traffic density and interactions among large container ships, tankers, tugs, barges and other vessels,” according to the petition. “This could reduce maneuvering and scheduling flexibility and increase reliance on a single principal navigation corridor.”

The deauthorization was requested by the buyer of Union Pier, an affiliate of hospitality investor Ben Navarro’s Beemok holding company. Because the provision was included in a legislative bill, it didn’t require a standard 90-day public review period.

“The deauthorization of Tidewater Reach is necessary because opening this important stretch of waterfront would create the kind of **meaningful public waterfront** access the community has overwhelmingly asked for while still preserving our maritime economy,” a Beemok spokesperson said last week in a written statement.



Waterfront access was high on the list of community requests at a January 2024 public feedback session about the redevelopment of Union Pier Terminal.

FILE/STAFF

A public marina has been among the requests.

“That’s one more opportunity we’re studying as part of Union Pier,” Beemok said..

The company added that the waterway will still provide “adequate depth and space for recreational and commercial vessels to safely navigate” the 2,000-foot swath between Union Pier and Shutes Folly Island, even with no further maintenance dredging in the area.

“This change is both supportive of Charleston’s working harbor while responsive to the clear desire of the majority of the public for greater access to the water,” the spokesperson said.

Frustrations

Cord Smythe, a longtime local mariner and waterfront worker, said he fully supports the redevelopment plans for Union Pier. But he was frustrated to learn earlier this summer that Beemok had decided to go through Congress to downgrade Tidewater Reach.

“They didn’t engage the actual users of the waterways,” Smythe said of the decision last week. “That, to me, is the biggest problem.”

Beemok, which has held dozens of public meetings about redevelopment ideas for the 67-acre Union Pier footprint, is equally frustrated about transparency concerns.

“Over the past few years, we’ve prioritized stakeholder engagement because listening to the people who know and care deeply about Charleston is critical to getting Union Pier right The maritime community has been an important part of that process,” the spokesperson said Friday.

The company added on Sept. 12 that it told Maritime Association of South Carolina in January that the Army Corps of Engineers had determined that a proposal to move the existing channel wasn’t feasible and that ”the preferred path forward was Congressional action.”

Smythe, who is vice chairman of the Maritime Association but was expressing his personal views, couldn’t be reached to respond to Beemok’s account. He said last week that the simplest and quickest solution is to remove the provision before the **water resources bill** becomes law and start the process over. A vote has not been scheduled.

The sale of Union Pier is scheduled to close next year. The deal isn't contingent on the Tidewater Reach deauthorization, according to the State Ports Authority.

The agency said it's working with other maritime industry representatives to assess the broader impact of the channel's likely status change on harbor traffic.

"We are engaged," a spokesperson for SC Ports said Thursday. "The port would not do anything to negatively impact the safety of our waterways."

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