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Bigger bridge needed for bigger ships: House takes action on trying to widen Sarah Long Bridge for future shipping traffic

DOVER — Two New Hampshire legislators are hoping to send a forceful message to their counterparts in Maine that the Sarah Mildred Long Bridge must be widened to make way for larger ships.

Reps. David Campbell, of Nashua, and Dale Sprague, of Somersworth, are planning to introduce an amendment to the state's 10-year transportation plan today that mandates in order to qualify for state funding, any future rehabilitation or rebuilding project must include widening the bridge's center span.

Last year, Maine and New Hampshire reached a broad agreement to fix up Memorial Bridge, the Sarah Mildred Long Bridge, and Interstate 95 High Level Bridge, which carries the highway over the Piscataqua River. That agreement calls for the Maine Department of Transportation to take the lead on a rehabilitation of the Sarah Long Bridge, slated to get under way in 2014 and conclude in 2017.

The project, budgeted at \$119 million, calls for workers to rehabilitate the Sarah Long Bridge on its existing trusses. However, officials at the N.H. Division of Ports and Harbors have raised concerns about merely rehabilitating the bridge. Unless the center span is widened, they say, newer, larger vessels won't be able to pass under the bridge, and businesses on the Piscataqua River stand to lose out.

"The bottom line is we don't want to invest in a bridge that's not going to allow for modern shipping traffic into Portsmouth Harbor," Campbell said. "It's foolhardy to do otherwise."

At the behest of the House Public Works and Highways Committee, Campbell said he and Sprague began crafting an amendment to the transportation plan that makes New Hampshire's share of the bridge funding contingent on the center span being widened to accommodate wider ships.

The measure could potentially go before the full House for a vote on Thursday, according to Campbell, who said he expects broad support among House members. Adopting the amendment could potentially invalidate the existing memorandum of agreement signed by transportation officials in Maine and New Hampshire for the renovation of the three bridges. But given the alternative — leaving a bridge in place that limits shipping — Campbell said lawmakers are likely to back the measure.

"How can any state ... spend tens of millions of dollars to fix a bridge ... and have it be obsolete from day one?" he said.