

Waukegan regroupes after EPA withdraws \$36M harbor project

Looking for an agreement without contingencies

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Looking to keep its hands on some \$26 million in federal funds, Waukegan started regrouping Wednesday after the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced it would withdraw plans to dredge Waukegan Harbor because the city set conditions on the project that included an eventual ban on industrial use in the harbor.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, said Wednesday that he contacted both EPA and city officials after learning about the quashed deal, looking to strike a new agreement that would keep Waukegan from being passed over in the current funding cycle.

"Mayor (Richard) Hyde and I talked this morning about going ahead and having the City Council sign off on a clean agreement, and move the project ahead as scheduled," Kirk said. "It's not too late, (and) Waukegan will not lose its \$26 million."

Kirk added that he spoke with EPA Regional Administrator Mary Gade after reading about the deal falling apart, and he came away with assurances that the money would still be available if city officials sign off on an agreement that does not include contingencies.

"We can move ahead with a clean agreement," Kirk said. "If an agreement is not in the correct form, then the other harbors (on the Great Lakes) get our \$26 million ... Facing that, my recommendation is that we get our money."

The EPA announced on Tuesday that it was withdrawing support for the overall \$36 million project over two conditions written into the city's authorization of the plan: That the city would bail out if \$4 million in state contributing funds failed to come through, and the city would also withdraw if efforts to decertify the harbor by 2012 failed to pass through Congress.

Representatives from Michigan-based Lafarge Inc., who was also part of the Waukegan Harbor project, could not be reached for comment late Wednesday.

While calling for the city to back off those stances, Kirk said he and U.S. Sen. Richard Durbin will continue to seek federal approval for the harbor to be limited to recreational use.

"Decertified' is not the right term," Kirk said. "It's limiting the depth of the harbor for recreational use only."

Staff reporter Dan Moran contributed to this report.