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Print Page

Close Window

Mayor, port director differ on expansion project scope

SCALE: Mayor to ask for \$350 million, but Sheffield aims for \$1 billion.

By SEAN COCKERHAM

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The Anchorage port director and the mayor's office are giving conflicting information on whether the troubled port expansion project is still a \$1 billion effort or if it's going to be scaled back.

Anchorage Mayor Dan Sullivan will ask the Legislature for roughly \$350 million and his chief of staff, Larry Baker, said there are no plans to ask for more.

But Anchorage Democratic Rep. Les Gara said he met for two hours Friday with port director Bill Sheffield, who told him he intends to seek \$1 billion to finish the project.

That caused Gara to write a letter Monday to the mayor and Assembly members, which was copied to news media, saying that news reports that the project had been scaled back from \$1 billion to \$350 million were apparently inaccurate.

"Policymakers should know the full cost of this project as the City and Port continue to seek state funding," Gara wrote. "Apart from minor items, the project has not been scaled back."

Sheffield confirmed to the Daily News in an interview on Monday that his intention is to go forward with the rest of the billion-dollar expansion after the \$350 million work is done on the north end, which is expected to take about five years.

"The rest of the project will come later," Sheffield said.

Baker, the mayor's chief of staff, seemed puzzled by Sheffield's comments.

"I don't know where he's coming up with that. That's clearly not the direction the administration is pursuing," he said.

"The mayor, I think, made it very clear ... that the billion-dollar price tag that had been talked about is not going forward at this point, that we don't have any plans because the proposal the mayor has signed on to will meet our needs for the next 40 or 50 years," he said.

Sheffield, a former governor, was appointed port director by then-Mayor George Wuerch in 2001 and has remained in the position through the administration of Mark Begich and now Mayor Dan Sullivan.

Sullivan said at a press conference last week that getting the \$350 million would provide "certainty that once and for all this project would get finished."

"The bottom line is we wanted to move forward with certainty at this point," Sullivan told reporters. "This project is too important to keep nibbling at and you never know in the future whether another Legislature or future (state) administration will be in a position to fund a project like this."

Sullivan said the money would at least get the northern phase of the port expansion project done. The mayor said the north end work was the most vital part of the port expansion project. But he also referred to it at the press conference as a "first phase."

"That's the most important part because that's where Horizon and Tote will be able to berth and supply, as they do, most of the goods that come into the state," he said. "It also adds a wet barge dock and a dry barge dock for future customers. So completing that north end is the essential first phase."

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