Port panels approve higher fees, seek trade reps

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The Port of Greater Baton Rouge's Finance and Executive committees Wednesday endorsed a 3 percent increase in wharfage rates on various commodities handled at the port's general cargo docks.

The committee recommendation will go to the full 15-member commission next Wednesday for consideration.

The fee increase — effective Nov. 1 — would generate $18,000 to $20,000 in annual revenue, said Buddy Knox, director of trade development.

The proposed increase will offset inflation and help the port keep up with increasing costs, Knox said. The port will remain competitive with other Gulf Coast ports, he said.

The general cargo docks primarily handle forestry products.

In other action, the Finance/Administration Committee authorized staff members to solicit proposals from firms or individuals to serve as trade representatives for the port in Mexico and the northeast United States.

Port Director Gary Pruitt said there is potential for developing import and export trade in Mexico, while port staff members only are able to make sales calls in the northeast about once a year.

Pruitt said the port needs experts in those two areas and could hire agents to solicit business for the port on a commission basis.

The Finance Committee also voted to open the port's advertising and public relations contract up for bid proposals. The contract was last bid in 1988 and is held by Diane Allen & Associates under a current one-year contract that expires Oct. 31.

The Engineering and Executive committees made no recommendation on whether to open the port's engineering contract up for bids or renew its contract with Berger & Associates - South Inc. The engineering firm's three-year contract expires Dec. 31.

Berger and predecessor firms, represented at port meetings by engineer K.J. Thomas, have been associated with the port through its 40-year history.

Pruitt said the advertising and engineering contracts were placed on the agenda for routine commission discussion because renewal dates are approaching and staff members will soon plan 1993-94 budgets.

Finance and Executive committee members were told that the port has applied through the Capital Region Planning Commission for federal highway funds to rebuild 1.8 miles of service roads in the port complex in Port.
Allen.
The federal government would pay 80 percent of the $2.8 million price tag, but the area only receives about $3.5 million in funding annually. The project likely would get only a portion of the funding. The port could phase the project in over more than one year, said Karen St. Cyr, director of economic development.
The regional planning commission—composed of local officials—may evaluate the port proposal in August for submission to the federal government, St. Cyr said. If approved for possible funding, the port would be required to come up with 20 percent of the estimated $140,000 in initial highway planning and design costs.

Pruitt warned port commissioners that the plans, once paid for, could sit idle for several years.

Commissioner Larry Johnson questioned the cost of the road, which must be built to federal highway standards. He suggested the port staff evaluate the cost of upgrading the existing road, which he estimated could cost $200,000 or more. That would be less than the 20 percent in matching funds, or $560,000, the port would fork out by participating in the federal funding program, Johnson said.