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House bill could help Electric Boat

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WASHINGTON — After conflicting votes in the House and Senate, the two chambers of Congress were headed Wednesday for a confrontation over whether the Navy can contract for more than one Virginia-class submarine at a time.

Members of Connecticut's congressional delegation expressed cautious optimism that at the end of the day, the new contracting authority, called multi-year procurement, would survive.

It would be a boon for southeastern Connecticut because it would be expected to stabilize the work force at the Groton shipyard of General Dynamics' Electric Boat Division.

"If you want to save money in the longterm, you'll go to multiyear," said Sen. Christopher Dodd, a Democrat.

The House Tuesday night voted 399-19 to approve a $368.7 billion defense spending bill that includes billions of dollars for Connecticut contractors.

House lawmakers, however, did not follow the recommendation of the House and Senate Armed Services Committees and lock in funding for a multiyear submarine contract with Electric Boat and its partner in the program, Newport News Shipbuilding in Virginia.

The multiyear plan would call for buying up to seven submarines over the next five years and allow the Pentagon to save more than $115 million per ship by making the longterm commitment.

U.S. Rep. Rob Simmons, R-2nd District, said the failure to approve the contracting authority may be a negotiating tactic or reflect skepticism about the program.

"The Navy wants it, and the defense contractors have demonstrated there would be substantial savings," said Simmons, a member of the House Armed Services Committee.

"We're hoping the Senate can put it in their bill - it's the right thing to do."

Senators from Connecticut, Rhode Island, Virginia and Maine have written to Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, pitching the multiyear contract.

The Senate appropriations panel Wednesday approved its $368.6 billion version of the defense spending bill, which included the new contracting authority. The Senate version reduced from seven to five the number of submarines that could be purchased over the next five years.