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Port Manatee gears up for Panama Canal traffic

Port Manatee to benefit from widening project in Central American nation

By MICHAEL POLLICK
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PORT MANATEE -- While the Panama Canal gets gouged out into a four-lane superhighway for ships, Port Manatee -- the closest U.S. deep-water port to the canal -- is doing some souping up of its own.



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COURTESY PHOTO / PORT MANATEE

Port Manatee, above, is expanding to meet the expected rise in business from a widened Panama Canal. The canal will be able to host direct shipments from Asia, which now must be unloaded on the nation's West Coast.

PORT MANATEE SNAPSHOT

New state grant received by Port Manatee: \$3 million, out of a \$65 million pot of available state matching

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The port is in the midst of an expansion, aided by a fresh \$3 million state grant, that will allow it to handle hundreds of thousands of semitrailer-sized containers of cargo per year. That compares with just a few thousand each year right now.

Meanwhile, the monumental expansion taking place at the canal should be done by 2014 and is expected to prompt global shifts in shipping patterns.

The largest container ships afloat, when headed for the United States from Asia, now unload their goods on the West Coast. Goods that are headed for East Coast markets must then travel by rail across the United States.

Because the Panama Canal will be able to handle these ships starting a few years from now, it will mean that eastern U.S. ports, and those on the Gulf of Mexico, will be able to host direct shipments to and from Asia much more easily.

"All this effort to expand the port is due in large part to the efforts to expand the canal," said Steve Tyndal, director of trade development and special projects at the 1,100-acre Manatee County complex.

"We are closest to the canal. We have the opportunity to grow our facilities. We are at the nexus of major highways and railroads, and we are at the epicenter of the west coast Florida growth activities," Tyndal said. "You are looking at the genesis of the perfect storm."

Port Manatee handled an impressive 9.3 million tons of cargo last year, but little of it was in containers, Tyndal said.

The port is ahead of schedule on completing its master plan, which involves a vast expansion of its ability to handle containers -- the size of a semitrailer and easily attached to a wheel chassis to move on the highway once a ship brings them into a port.

Already, Port Manatee has moved and enlarged its ship turning basin, so that instead of being limited to ships of 800 feet in length, it can now turn those 1,000 feet long. The port also is roughly halfway

grant money.

Expansion of Panama Canal expected to be completed: 2014.

Number of tons of cargo Port Manatee handled in 2006: 9.3 million tons.

Old turning basin limitation at Port Manatee: 800-foot ships.

New turning basin limitation at Port Manatee: 1,000-foot ships.

Number of containers the port officials think they will be able to move once Port Manatee is expanded: 300,000 to 600,000.

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through a related project that gives it a half-mile of new deep-water berthing.

The "Berth 12" project, as it is called, should be completed in 2008. After that, the port turns to a landside buildout of warehouses and lay-down yards for moving the containers onto and off ships, Tyndal said.

Meanwhile, under a partnership with Logistec U.S.A., a division of a Canadian stevedoring company, the port should soon get the use of a \$4 million mobile harbor crane, designed to speedily load and unload containerized cargo.

In perhaps two to three years, after the port completes its present expansion program, it will be able to make quantum leaps in the amount of container cargo it handles.

"We are very confident that we could move 300,000 to 600,000 containers a year through Port Manatee," Tyndal said.

On Monday, the Florida Ports Council told the Herald-Tribune that Port Manatee will receive nearly \$3 million in state matching grants this year, to help the port complete its ambitious program. The port's share comes from \$65 million in state matching grant money doled out by the Legislature this year.

Lawmakers had two funds to disburse this year for port projects -- a \$15 million annual port improvement fund and a one-time \$50 million program.

Because Port Manatee's project, building a new berth, already was under way and because the port needed its funding quickly, the Florida Ports Council shuffled the funding requests from the state's 14 ports to accommodate Manatee, said Nancy Keikauf, executive vice president of the Florida Ports Council.

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