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AD Tramontana not building at Port Manatee but likely elsewhere in county

Port Manatee signs agreement with Pasha auto processor

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John Prasha of Prasha Automotive Services address the Manatee County Port Authority after signing a memorandum of understanding Thursday to create an auto processing plant there.
CHARLES SCHELLE/Bradenton Herald

PICASA

By CHARLES SCHELLE — cschelle@bradenton.com

MANATEE -- Port Manatee is a step closer to entering the automotive processing industry after the Manatee County Port Authority on Thursday signed a memorandum of understanding with Pasha Automotive Services.

The Corte Madera, Calif.-based company exports and imports cars at seven ports around the country, including major importer/exporter Port of Baltimore. A new processing terminal in Manatee could bring between 100 and 200 jobs here.

Pasha Automotive is one of 30 businesses that make up the privately held Pasha Group, founded by George Pasha II in 1947. The company has processed more than 5 million cars in San Diego since it opened in 1990.

"We see this as an absolute jewel," said John Pasha, senior vice president of Pasha Group and grandson of the company's founder.

Pasha is set to take over a 174,000-square-foot warehouse as a processing center and park its cars on 45 acres, with an option to expand to 100 acres at the roll on/roll off facility, as opposed to a container operation. The agreement states at least 30 acres have to be contiguous.

American cars assembled in Mexico would be imported to Port Manatee to be finished and inspected before going to dealerships. Cars could also be exported to Latin America.

In addition to import/export of vehicles, Pasha also needs workers who would install body kits and electronic packages customers order from dealerships. Those features would be installed at Port Manatee before being sent to dealerships, Pasha said.

Pasha would be the first finished vehicle car processor at the port, said Port Executive Director Carlos Buqueras.

The company looked at Port Tampa, but decided Manatee was a better option, said Port Authority Chairwoman Carol Whitmore, because everything is built ready to go.

Pasha said the port's proximity to Mexico, Cuba, rail connectivity and highway access were factors that made Manatee attractive, Pasha said, in addition to the Berth 12 expansion and container terminal set to open in October.

"I think it would be a successful venture for our customers to see such a well-run facility," Pasha said.

Pasha also owns two vessels, the second one set to be in service next year, which can transport cars, freight, Department of Defense helicopters and Carnival cruise ships, he said, which could help business in Port Manatee.

Pasha is also in discussion with CSX to phase in rail operations and connectivity. Port Manatee is expecting two locomotive engines, purchased last year through federal grants, to be delivered soon.

Port Authority board member Michael Gallen called the deal a "brilliant opportunity."

"Since I've been on this board, this is tops of what we're trying to do as a county commission and port authority to diversify our local economy," he said.

The search for an automotive processor took about five months after meeting with car manufacturers, ports and processors, said Matthew Appice, director of international sales for Port Manatee.

"We had many car processors that have since come to take a look at our port and shown an interest, and we really feel we got the right one here," Appice said.

The presence of Pasha and potentially luxury sports car maker Tramontana would prompt working with Manatee Technical Institute to create courses to train the local work force for jobs at Pasha and Tramontana, Buqueras said. That could lead to MTI and Port Manatee creating a Center of Automotive Excellence for training, he added.

MTI already offers automotive service excellence training for car technicians and started an automotive collision program for bodywork, said MTI Director Mary Cantrell. If companies need specific training company representatives will talk to instructors, and often the Economic Development Council inquires about potential courses, she said.

"This is all good for Manatee County," Cantrell said. "If they don't find the skilled labor force here, they'll go somewhere else. That's why it's important to build quality programs to meet and exceed their expectations."

With the agreement signed, Pasha will meet with major car manufacturers in Detroit, at trade shows and elsewhere in the country to bring those cars to Port Manatee, Pasha said.

No timeframe is put on executing a deal and for Pasha Automotive to start.

"It's open-ended, and the reason why is because they're going to the car show in Detroit," Whitmore said. "He'll go there and try to sell it. They need customers to come here to try and sell it."

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[< Previous Story](#)

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[Next Story >](#)



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