

Ports seeking a piece of short-sea shipping

Providence, Quonset and New Bedford are among those vying for part of a \$1.5-billion federal transportation program.

BY PHILIP MARCELO
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

Three regional ports are looking to position themselves as major hubs

COMMERCE | for short-sea shipping, as

President Obama's administration pushes a plan for developing a network of regional and local ports to alleviate highway congestion and lower costs for busi-

nesses.

The Port of Providence has applied for federal stimulus money for a pair of container cranes, wind turbines and solar panels that its managers say would remake the port's operations and create more high-wage jobs for Rhode Islanders.

But it faces competition re-

SEE **PORTS, A13**

Ports

Continued from Page A1

gionally from Quonset Business Park, in North Kingstown, and the Port of New Bedford, both of which are also seeking funding under the \$1.5-billion federal transportation program to re-vamp their port infrastructures for the short-sea trade.

ProvPort, the nonprofit organization that operates the port, is seeking \$30.5 million for two 650-ton shipping container cranes, two 200-foot wind turbines and a number of solar panels.

The port's vision is twofold: expand into the short-sea shipping industry, and produce enough renewable energy to completely wean port tenants away from fossil fuels, with power to spare.

The two cranes would replace a 30-year-old pair, whose leases are set to expire next year, that cannot handle shipping containers. (The city owns another crane purchased under Mayor Vincent A. Cianci's administration that it uses for handling scrap metal, but that is to be decommissioned at the end of the year.)

The wind turbines and solar panels would turn the port from an electricity consumer to a producer of additional energy which it could sell. "We're wildly excited by this," says port spokesman Joshua Fenton. "ProvPort can be a different economic engine for the future."

Proponents say short-sea shipping — in which overseas goods are delivered in containers to major ports (such as Los Angeles or New York-New Jersey) then sent by barge to smaller regional ports — is more cost-efficient and safer than road transport.

The Obama administration is pushing short-sea trade as a way to alleviate highway congestion and provide a greener alternative to relying solely on trucks for state-to-state transit.

Currently, none of the three ports are equipped to handle shipping containers.

Quonset has applied for \$45 million from the federal program as it prepares for the coming of Deepwater Wind, the company that Rhode Island has chosen to develop wind farms off Block Island.

Its application calls for road, railway, pier and terminal improvements for the port as well as the purchase of a \$4-million crane that could handle a few thousand shipping containers a year and move the massive components of the wind turbines, which would be assembled at Quonset, said David Preston, a Quonset Development Corporation spokesman.

Preston said the plan is "enormously different" from an ambitious plan touted nearly a decade ago to turn Quonset into major container port to rival those in California or New Jersey. "It's the difference between moving 2.4 million containers and 10,000 units," he said. "They're not even comparable."

New Bedford is seeking \$36.4



AP / JOSEPH KACZMAREK

Providence, Quonset and New Bedford, Mass., all want to handle container barges, like this one shown in Philadelphia.

million to dredge the port, purchase cranes, improve roadways and extend port bulkheads.

Port Director Kristin Decas says that New Bedford, already the nation's top fishing port (based on the value of its landings), intends to emerge as a premier transit hub in this developing network of cargo ports. "This will turn the lights back on in New Bedford," she says.

Fred Hashaway, director of government affairs and policy at the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation, says that the stimulus plan presents a unique opportunity for American ports, which have traditionally been left out of federal funding for infrastructure improvements.

Under the Obama administration, the federal Department of Transportation has committed to developing a short-sea shipping network known as America's Marine Highway.

According to the federal agency, the country's 25,000 miles of coastal and inland waterways move just about 2 percent of the nation's domestic freight, far less than in the European Union, where a highly developed network of ports represents almost 40 percent of intercontinental freight transport.

Providence, Quonset and New Bedford are each trying to become one of New England's major hubs under this plan, but it's not clear which is best positioned.

All three are deepwater ports, have rail connections (although New Bedford's has been in disuse), and are adjacent to a major interstate — all key for getting goods off and on cargo ships and out to suppliers and producers quickly.

But competition for the federal grants is steep.

William Adams, a federal Department of Transportation spokesman, said the department received 1,400 applications representing all 50 states and the District of Columbia, totaling more than \$57 billion, far in excess of what the government has allocated. More than half are for highway or bridge projects.

The main qualifications for the grants are whether the project has a significant impact on the nation, region or metropolitan area through job creation, sustainable energy and business investment. A decision on the

grant requests is expected by February.

Hashaway, of the state EDC, declined to say which of Rhode Island's ports stands the best chance of winning federal funding. "We don't see Quonset and ProvPort as competing interests. We see it as a win-win for the state if one or both are ultimately chosen," he said.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts, though, took another route, choosing between two competing proposals, one to develop Fall River and one for New Bedford.

"It's a shame," says Kenneth Fiola Jr., executive vice president of the Fall River Office of Economic Development. "The state should have applied for both and let the feds pick and choose."

New Bedford Mayor Scott Lang says that because the industry is still in its developing stages, there is room in Southern New England for all the ports to be developed for short-sea trade.

"It's not mutually exclusive," said Lang. "There is no reason why we can't develop different niches. Each port is unique and each port has its place in American economy."

The stakes are high for Southern New England communities.

Rhode Island has the third-highest unemployment rate in the nation (behind Michigan and Nevada) with unemployment hovering just under 13 percent. The Providence metropolitan area, which covers all of Rhode Island, Fall River and New Bedford, has more than 15 percent unemployment.

ProvPort officials estimate that new operations at the port could inject \$120 million into the local economy and open up 1,000 more good-paying, long-term jobs.

New Bedford estimates that its proposal would bring 948 long-term jobs; 1,271 immediate jobs and \$56.7 million in annual benefit to the economy. Quonset estimates that its project would produce between 494 and 805 jobs with an economic output of \$28.4 million annually.

Said Fiola, of Fall River: "Whoever comes out of the box first will be able to capitalize on whatever market opportunities come out of this short-sea shipping initiative."

pmarco@projo.com / (401) 277-7493