

From: Marie Sanderson <msanderson@rgppc.org>
To: Veldran, KatherineKatherineVeldran@gov.sc.gov
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Ports enjoy a moment in the presidential spotlight

By Kevin Robillard

9/13/13 6:08 PM EDT

The nation's ports are getting presidential treatment.

President Barack Obama traveled to Jacksonville, Fla., in July and Miami in March. Vice President Joe Biden headed to Baltimore last week and will visit Charleston, S.C., and Savannah, Ga., on Monday. Those five port visits compare with zero events at airports, zero at road or bridge construction sites and only a single event at a train station.

"This has been a consistent theme and message and highlight from the president and vice president over the course of the year," said American Association of Port Authorities President Kurt Nagle, noting Obama also cited ports in his State of the Union address and even brought them up during an interview with Jay Leno earlier this month.

A confluence of events and trends — the expansion of the Panama Canal, congressional consideration of the Water Resources Development Act, the Transportation Department's decision to funnel more cash to ports and the increased role of global trade — have conspired to push ports into the D.C. spotlight.

"Americans never think about the ports," Biden said last week in Baltimore. "Unless they work around the ports or are in the ports, they don't get it. And we've got to explain to them because it affects their jobs as well."

The focus on ports goes beyond policy. For one, ports, with their big cranes, hardhat-wearing workers and ocean views, tend to make compelling visuals for a presidential event. And for Biden, a potential

presidential candidate in 2016, a trip to South Carolina is always a good idea, as is wooing longshoremen unions.

While port and harbor advocates appreciate the recognition, what they'd really like to see is policy action. While \$1.4 trillion in goods moves through American ports annually and international trade accounts for a quarter of GDP, backers say the administration and Hill leaders have yet to lay out the big-picture vision of how to pay for port maintenance and improvements over the long term and how they tie into improved roads and railways.

In other words, ports are facing the same problems as the rest of the nation's aging transportation infrastructure.

"Great ports need to be connected to great roads and rails and a broader infrastructure," said Robyn Boerstling, director of infrastructure at the National Association of Manufacturers. "There has to be that larger, broader vision and right now we're not seeing it."

There have been improvements. Boerstling and Nagle pointed to the creation of administration and Hill committees on freight transportation as a sign Washington leaders are beginning to understand the problems, even if they are still searching for solutions.

The other big question is what to do with the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund, a rare federal account that takes in far more than it spends. Only half of the \$1.8 billion it collects annually is spent, a number the House and Senate water bills promise to increase drastically in the coming years.

"No part of our infrastructure has adequate attention. But ports get less than most," said former Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell, who now heads the pro-infrastructure group Building America's Future.

In the meantime, the administration has slowly increased the amount ports have received from TIGER grants. In the most recently announced round of grants, ports claimed 20 percent of the \$474 million. On his visit to Baltimore, Biden announced a \$10 million TIGER grant that he said would create 5,700 new jobs.

Some of that \$10 million will be spent widening channels to accommodate the 160-foot-wide ships that will be able to pass through the expanded Panama Canal beginning in 2015. The canal's expansion has set off a race among East Coast ports to prepare for the massive ships, something the administration tried to expedite last year as part of its "We Can't Wait" initiative.

"The Panama is being widened so that these big supertankers can come in," Obama said on Leno's show. "Now, that will be finished in 2015. If we don't deepen our ports all along the Gulf — places like Charleston, S.C., or Savannah, Ga., or Jacksonville, Fla. — if we don't do that, those ships are going to go someplace else. And we'll lose jobs. Businesses won't locate here."

The canal's expansion has created a singular event for the administration to tie port spending to.

"The expansion project is significant and is cause for a rallying cry," Boerstling said.

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