

Deep dredge for seaport needed

BY ANDREW D. MELICK

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It's déjà vu at the Port of Miami. Every few decades the same question comes up: How much should the seaport spend to sustain Greater Miami's growth? On each occasion, the region's economic engine would have stalled were it not for port officials with a solid grasp of present realities, a clear vision of the future and the courage to make expensive decisions.

Miami's seaport dates back more than a century, and history has repeatedly shown that public investment in port infrastructure, so unilaterally beneficial to the community, is money well spent.

In 1902, Henry Flagler offered to dredge a channel (18 feet deep) from downtown directly to the ocean, if the federal government would pony up the money to make the cut through the Miami Beach peninsula and dredge the offshore entrance channel. The cost (\$500,000 in a 40/60 split between Flagler and Uncle Sam) was considered outrageous, but when was the last time anyone questioned if it was worth it? Miami has been a port town ever since.

When the SS Caledonia diverted to Havana in 1931 because the Miami channels were too shallow for the famous ship, the message was clear: either deepen the channels or let Miami's economy languish. Miami Mayor E.G. Sewell finally gained the support of his former detractors to lobby the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to dredge the port to 30 feet deep. One can only imagine the resistance to an appropriation of \$2 million when the country was sinking deeper into the Great Depression, but Sewell got the job done.

During the 1950s, while an emerging Caribbean cruise industry beckoned for a place to call home, the Port of Miami was deteriorating to the point of obsolescence. The Dade County Commission advocated for a new port to be constructed on a huge man-made island in the middle of Biscayne Bay. The price tag was \$10 million. Opponents scoffed, "Where is that kind of money going to come from?" With or without funding, however, the county persevered. Eventually seed money was raised to construct Dodge Island, and the naysayers are still eating crow.

As containerization of cargo took hold in the 1970s, a dedicated container facility became vital if the Port of Miami was going to compete for business. Port Director Carmen Lunetta announced plans to build Lummus Island immediately east of Dodge

Island. Dredging an entirely new channel (42 feet deep) to the container docks would alone cost in the tens of millions of dollars. Lunetta fought for federal funds like a bulldog, and to the surprise of everyone but himself, he got them.

Today, container ships have grown to dimensions that were inconceivable even 10 years ago. The partially loaded Don Carlos, which recently berthed in Miami, is one of the latest generation of “post-panamax” ships currently too large to fit through the locks of the Panama Canal. Dozens of these ships are already in service. To run economically, they must be loaded to depths exceeding 45 feet. Port Director Bill Johnson has labored tirelessly to overcome environmental hurdles and secure approval to dredge the port to 50 feet deep in order to accommodate these ships. When Panama Canal expansion is completed in 2014, does anyone really think ships like the Don Carlos will call in ports that are not deep enough to take them fully loaded?

The final piece of the puzzle, as usual, is the money. The port needs \$75 million in federal matching funds to move its “Deep Dredge” project forward. Port Director Johnson and his boss, Miami-Dade County Mayor Carlos Alvarez, are committed to making this happen, and like their predecessors they will have to be relentless to come up with the capital. The historical parallels are uncanny.

Those who doubt the value of the Deep Dredge need to consider where Miami would be today if equally audacious port projects had not been funded in the past.

Capt. Andrew D. Melick is a harbor pilot in Miami and author of “A Century of Service, a History of the Biscayne Bay Pilots.”