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Missing link: U.S. nod to deeper port

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It is often said that, "Nothing is more expensive than missed opportunity."

A rare opportunity is at hand to create thousands of new jobs -- well-paying and permanent jobs that would benefit this community in ways we have not seen since Henry Flagler brought his railway here almost a century ago.

The Port of Miami must join the ranks of what will be a new breed of deep-water hub ports that can accommodate the new generation of larger vessels that require 50-foot depths. The super-sized vessels will begin traversing an expanded Panama Canal in 2014 with container capacities double the size of the average containerized ships now calling on our port.

We want this business and the estimated 33,000 jobs that our state sorely needs. But, like any ambitious venture, this one requires an investment of effort and money.

Thanks to local, state and federal support, two of the three critical infrastructure improvements necessary to grow our cargo traffic are in place: First, construction of the tunnel that will greatly improve access in and out of the port is under way and scheduled for completion in 2014; second, work is under way, thanks to a \$23-million federal grant, to restore freight service linking port facilities to the Hialeah Rail Yard and the national railway system; and, the third, and most critical, project is what we call the Deep Dredge.

As Gov. Rick Scott said, while touring the Port of Miami, the deepening of our channel "makes all the sense in the world." As President Obama prepares his federal budget proposal to Congress, I would add that the Deep Dredge is an opportunity we absolutely cannot afford to lose.

The Port of Miami is the only port south of Norfolk, Va., capable of being deep-dredged by 2014. We are one of only three East Coast ports fully authorized by Congress to do so, and we are now completing the design and engineering work in conjunction with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

It is imperative to keep this project moving. But, to do so, the next federal budget must include an allocation -- even one single dollar would keep the project on track to support the contracting phase. If not, the Port of Miami will lose a critical year in the race to 2014. It's a race neither we, nor the entire nation, can afford to lose.

Miami just established another notable U.S. record in 2010. The Miami Customs District produced, yet again, the largest trade surplus of any area in the nation. While the average U.S. Customs District imports 1.6 times the value of its exports, Miami *exports* 1.6 times the value of its imports. In fact, on a per capita basis, we exported nearly four times the national average. This amounts to a \$20 billion-plus trade surplus for Miami last year.

With only three Atlantic Seaboard ports at minus 50-foot depth (Norfolk, New York and Halifax), the world's cargo carriers will have no choice but to shift more and more vessels from direct U.S. routings to nearby off-shore transshipment hubs such as Freeport, Bahamas. Once these hubs are created, they will not be un-created. Losing more jobs to offshore locales would be an expensive proposition -- not only for South Florida -- but the entire state and country.

As the recent Florida Chamber of Commerce's Trade and Logistics Study states ``Florida faces a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform our economy by becoming a global center for trade, logistics and export-oriented manufacturing activities." To do so, at least one Florida port must have the necessary infrastructure in place by 2014.

The Deep Dredge has widespread backing in our community with congressional leaders, the business community and local officials all in support. The only missing link is the federal allocation to keep the project on track.

We cannot let this opportunity pass us by. Let's continue to express our collective concern for the creation of new jobs. Let's make the Deep Dredge a reality.

Bill Johnson is the director of the Port of Miami.