

Port Manatee effort would boost incentives

Tampa Bay Business Journal - by [Jane Meinhardt](#) Staff Writer

PALMETTO -- New business opportunities are now sprouting in the thousands of acres of undeveloped land around Port Manatee.

To create and take advantage of the opportunities and provide expansion capabilities, port executives are planning to establish a special economic development zone encompassing surrounding property.

The **Port Manatee Encouragement Zone** would give participating businesses and property owners incentives to develop land with projects that benefit the port and international trade and provide regional economic boosts.

It would also provide more jobs and diversify industry while preventing congestion and maintaining the port's transportation advantages.

The concept is in its preliminary stages, but it is somewhat similar to statewide **Enterprise Zones** in that it would provide incentives to businesses to encourage economic development.

The Encouragement Zone and its proposed incentives have to go through review by the **Manatee County Commission**, the state **Department of Community Affairs** and the U.S. Department of Commerce before it can be established.

Early stage buy-ins

So far, seven property owners have signed a letter of interest in the concept.

For businesses opting to participate, the zone would save thousands of dollars in fees and other costs for developments that serve port-related needs such as distribution centers.

Participating property owners and developers would be included in the port's Development of Regional Impact exemption, which would save the time and money.

The zone also would provide local impact fee exemptions, accelerated county permitting consideration, collaborative marketing and opportunities for joining the port's Foreign Trade Zone.

"For us, the primary benefit would be for potential tenants," said Arthur Roth, a manager at HRK Holdings LLC. "It makes it an attractive lease site when the impact fees are eliminated for someone who wants to put up a \$10 million distribution center."

Large holdings

HRK owns nearly 700 acres east of the port. The company purchased the former Piney Point phosphate plant property several years ago.

The port has an agreement to use 300 acres for dredge spoil retention, Roth said.

"We've planned to develop the remaining 300 acres as an industrial park with tenants and businesses that are complementary to the port," he said. "We're really in a unique situation because we're not surrounded by urban development. We think the port is poised for tremendous growth."

The port's nonurban setting is a bonus for businesses and will fuel its growth, said William Ralph, a maritime economist and consultant at **R.K. Johns & Associates** in New York City who was involved in the port's master planning.

Ports in major metro areas have expensive land transportation problems and traffic congestion that Port Manatee does not now have and can avoid by creating the zone.

"The distribution center business will continue to grow around it, and it's good business planning to encourage that development," he said.

Manatee developer Stanley Riggs, who has 23 acres adjacent to the port under development, has built 360,000 square feet of warehouse and office space at his **Port Manatee Commerce Center**.

At a recent meeting with commercial real estate agents at the center, Kevin Button, the center's property manager, stressed the importance of the zone.

"It will bring a lot of commerce," he said. "We think it's a big deal."

No specific boundaries are set for the zone because participation is voluntary and the port does not want to exclude any property owner, said David McDonald, port director.

Ideally, it would extend east to Interstate 75 and include the proposed direct access from the port to the interstate.

The port cannot afford to buy the land it needs for the future, but it can foster public-private partnerships to meet its needs.

"We have a very rare opportunity other ports don't have," McDonald said. "We have 3,000 acres of open property between us and Interstate 75. We can turn it into development centered on international trade and commerce."

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