

Daily Record

Editorial: Keep cruise business booming

by Daily Record Staff

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The cruise ship business is booming at the Port of Baltimore.

With the recent arrival of Royal Caribbean's Enchantment of the Seas, two year-round cruise ships will call Baltimore home.

Since Baltimore became a cruise port in 2006, growth in traffic has been exponential. In 2008, about 27 cruises with nearly 90,000 passengers originated here. The number jumped to 81 cruises with 329,000 passengers in 2009. Ten more cruises are scheduled this year and the total number is expected to grow to 113 next year.

The major reason for the growth, despite the economic downturn, seems to be location, location, location.

"The location is about as good as it gets — right off Interstate 95, which gives us a really unique access point to reach the terminal," says Maryland Port Administration spokesman Richard Scher. "Cruise lines are taking notice of that — they're seeing where the people are."

Indeed they are. And they are liking what they see — so much that Royal Caribbean just moved the Enchantment of the Seas to Baltimore from Norfolk, Va., where it has been based since 2007.

This is undeniably good economic news at a time when the state can really use some. Recent announcements that more than 400 Marylanders will lose their jobs due to the closing of the Solo Cup plant in Baltimore County and Rosecroft Raceway in Prince George's County have cast a pall over a nascent recovery.

But as good as things are here for the cruise business right now, the state needs to act promptly to stay ahead of the competition and give the industry more room to grow at the port. That's because with next year's expected growth to 113 cruises, Baltimore's lone passenger cruise terminal will be at capacity.

The Board of Public Works just took one step by approving a \$2.9 million gangway for passenger ships to make embarking and debarking more pleasant for passengers in all types of weather.

That's fine as far as it goes, but it doesn't go nearly far enough. The state needs to decide whether it makes more sense to expand the current cruise terminal or build a second one. And the decision can't come fast enough. Every lost minute is time that competing ports can be strengthening their hand to regain the advantage.

Maybe the answer is public funding or maybe it's a public-private partnership as with the Seagirt Marine Terminal, but when you have a proven winner that's performing well even in a down economy, you need to provide it with the resources to remain successful