

New port cranes begin to shoulder load at Seagirt
Public-private partnership expands terminal and prepares Baltimore for the
larger ships of the future

By Candy Thomson, The Baltimore Sun

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The manufacturers of Asia just got a lot closer to Baltimore.

Four massive cranes at the Seagirt Marine Terminal began writing the next chapter in the region's maritime history Thursday morning as they started unloading a 981-foot cargo ship laden with containers onto waiting trucks.

The cranes are the most visible symbols of a \$1.3 billion public-private partnership between the Port of Baltimore and Ports America Chesapeake that allowed the expansion of Seagirt to handle the world's largest ships and gives the facility a leg up on almost every port from Maine to Florida. Only Norfolk, Va., can boast of having similar capacity.

"We've got the East Coast covered," said Mark Schmidt, Ports America's general manager, as he watched the cranes reach and pluck containers off the Miramarin's deck like tiny toys. "Look at that speed."

It took nearly seven months from their traffic-stopping arrival from China for the cranes to be assembled and tested, Schmidt said. But now they're ready to prove their \$40 million worth.

On the highly competitive Eastern seaboard, ports are racing to see which of them will be ready to receive the so-called super post-Panamax ships that will use the expanded Panama Canal to get from Asia to U.S. markets when it opens in late 2014.

And shipping companies hoping to take advantage of the economy of scale are planning even larger ships, said Thomas Shafer Jr., vice president with California-based Moffatt and Nichol, one of the world's largest marine engineering firms.

"As world trade increases, the ships are only going to get bigger. So you'd better be able to handle them or you'll be left behind," Shafer said.

The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey needs to find \$1 billion to raise the Bayonne Bridge 64 feet to give such large ships access to the port's main terminals. Ports south of the Chesapeake Bay are struggling to get the

funding to dredge shipping channels to the 50-foot depth required by the larger ships.

"Baltimore," Shafer said, "is out in the lead."

That two- to three-year edge will allow port officials to lock in old customers while bringing new ones to the fold, said James White, executive director of the Maryland Port Administration, which owns the port.

"Humans are creatures of habit. You pick a port and it's a very slow process for a customer to revert," White said. "In vessel operations and terminal operations, we're less expensive than New York or Virginia. Right now, they have us on rail capability and when we fix that, we'll do very well."

Five years ago, things didn't look good. The state didn't have the estimated \$106 million needed to extend Seagirt's Berth 4, dredge the area to 50 feet and buy the cranes capable of reaching across the decks of the huge ships.

The 50-year deal with Ports America, signed in 2009, made it a reality.

"Volume is up. Ports America is doing as good a job, if not better, than when we ran Seagirt," White said.

In addition to the modernization, the partnership ensures that the state will receive an annual payment of \$15 per container handled above 500,000 containers, a term that could be worth \$750 million over the life of the contract.

The new cranes cast a giant shadow. From the pier to the tip of the boom, they stretch 400 feet, or the height of the World Trade Center at Inner Harbor. Each one can lift the equivalent of a space shuttle, or 15 tons more than the adjacent older, blue cranes.

Sitting 14 stories above the pier, a longshoreman in a gleaming white cockpit can move two containers at a time from deck to truck in 90 seconds.

The older cranes can do 37 container moves an hour — among the quickest on the East Coast. The new cranes approach 50 moves, Schmidt said.

The biggest challenge was making the electrical connections between the booms, the crane cabins and the dockside office that allow operators to troubleshoot and diagnose problems and download new software.

Then came the 24-hour endurance tests, in which each crane was required to perform flawlessly through a series of commands.

"It's a little short-term pain for long-term gain," Schmidt said. "We wanted to make sure we got the product we paid for in the condition we expected."

Wednesday, it took the cranes 767 moves to unload and load the Miramarin before it headed out to southern U.S. ports.

Mauro Dalbo, Baltimore manager for Mediterranean Shipping Co., operator of the Miramarin, said the new berth and cranes were an opportunity for the port to expand its productivity and profile.

"It's a great day for the port and a great day for the people of Baltimore and Maryland," he said.

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Seagirt cranes

Location: Seagirt Marine Terminal

Height: 40 stories from ground to boom tip

Weight: 1,500 tons

Lift capacity: 187,000 pounds

Cost: \$40 million for four

Manufacturer: ZPMC, Shanghai, China

Arrived: June 2012

Operational: February 2013

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