

Deep Water Port *notes*

The News Portfolio of The Connecticut Deep Water Port Community

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Maritime Matters in Washington

by Mr. Paul Bea



The ATB Freeport outbound on the Thames River after delivering to Dow Chemical. Photo by Senior Connecticut Pilot Captain Charlie Jonas

How fares the maritime sector in the Nation's Capital? The first year of a new Congress and president is a crucial time for organizing and acting. Coming off an election, the winner have a tailwind of electoral support that can help get things done. Nine months into the 115th Congress and nearly eight months into the Donald Trump presidency, one can point to some indicators, if not many deeds as yet. The metrics that come to mind – personnel, policy initiatives, and legislative advances.

It takes time to ramp up a new administration's human infrastructure – political appointments to staff and confirmation level positions. President Trump has been a bit slower than other new White House occupants in naming people to positions, while minority party tactics have kept the confirmation rate at a slow pace. Trump also has been slow to fill lower level "schedule C" political posts. These populate departments and agencies and provide the human infrastructure to help a White House shift from transition to active administration through the operating agencies of government. As in any change of administration, civil servants in mostly non-political posts shift into a holding pattern to await policy directions and new initiatives. As a result, not a lot gets done until the cabinet members have in place their subcabinet officers and schedule Cs to carry out administration directives.

By September, some Department of Transportation subcabinet positions still await confirmation and only one of eight open administrator spots in DOT is confirmed and sworn. As it happens that is Adm. Mark Buzby (Navy ret) in the Maritime Administration. For

the maritime sector, the selection of Secretary Elaine Chao after the November election was a promising sign. Already a seasoned cabinet officer (Bush 43), her resume includes Deputy Maritime Administrator and Chair of the Federal Maritime Commission. Add to that her father's Foremost Group shipping business. Rarely, if ever, have there been transportation secretaries with such familiarity with the commercial maritime world.

Scanning the Washington landscape for other maritime related appointments one can see top level offices still filled with civil servants "performing the duties of." Among those posts are Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works and NOAA Administrator, both being influential in navigation related matters. The five-seat Federal Maritime Commission has a vacancy, created with the recent resignation of former chairman Mario Cordero, now running the Port of Long Beach. The president will fill that seat with a Republican. Meanwhile, the president named Commissioner Michael Khouri Acting Chairman.

As for Trump policy initiatives, most activity has been in how government work. His executive orders on reducing regulation and speeding project delivery have been well-received by some in the business and public sectors. As with many things, we wait to see how the Administration implements those orders.

Another Trump policy expression is his proposed FY 2018 Federal Budget. The Office of Management & Budget came up with a budget that boosted national security spending and reduced non-defense spending. An early draft posed immediate concern in the Department



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of Transportation when it became known that OMB proposed elimination of agencies that included the Maritime Administration. It was quickly rejected by Secretary Chao and she prevailed. The issued budget seeks to eliminate the popular TIGER grants program (-\$500 million) and proposes cuts in funding for the Corps of Engineers but the Senate has since approved TIGER funding and both chambers are in the process of agreeing on near-record funding levels for the civil works program. Similarly, the House defense appropriations bill rejected the administration's proposed addition of only eight new ships for the Navy and instead made it thirteen. Trump campaigned with a pledge for a 350 ship navy – an increase of 75 over today's fleet – but his budget was viewed as not hewing to that objective. A Navy assessment and its Hill advocates call for an eventual 355 ships.

The president has been vocal about pursuing his major campaign promises but unspecific in his proposals. Details for tax reform and infrastructure are being left to Congress to determine. One will have to wait until 2018 for action on tax and infrastructure legislation.

The House is passing bills in its usual efficient way and the Senate at its customary, deliberate pace. Committees have produced the annual Coast Guard authorization bills. They held hearings on complaints about the changing ocean carrier industry and its growing reliance on alliances in the container trade. Port service providers and cargo interests are alarmed and the committees are responding. But when it comes to floor action in the Senate, the emphasis is necessarily on processing Trump nominations and appropriations bills.

One of the few examples of unanimity in action thus far is the response to the devastation of Hurricane Harvey. Congress is on track to approve, in a week's time, over \$15 billion for FEMA and other agency recovery programs. Their prompt action – despite some Republican opposition to the level of funding – is unsurprising and reassuring. We expect that of our government even as creates doubts on its ability to get other things done.

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