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JaxPort doesn't need to dredge



Ron Littlepage
times-union columnist

Those familiar with the drumbeat coming from JaxPort to spend \$1 billion to dredge the St. Johns River shipping channel have heard this line dozens of times: Just look at a map of the United States. Jacksonville is farther west than any of our competitor ports on the East Coast.

Add to that the rail connections in Jacksonville and the proximity of interstate highways, and Jacksonville is better suited to move goods to U.S. population centers.

With a deeper channel, Jacksonville will be the natural choice for shippers to bring their container-laden vessels.

There's a major flaw, however, in that line of reasoning. It's not supported by history.

Savannah is JaxPort's main competitor. Its port has the same channel depth as Jacksonville's.

Two decades ago, the number of containers moving through each port was roughly the same.

Since then, the container traffic in Savannah has boomed. Even with the supposed advantages JaxPort has, that hasn't happened here.

Dale Lewis is a retired CSX executive who spent 30 years in transportation planning and who has a graduate degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology that focused on shipping.

Since he retired, Lewis has spent "several hundred hours" of his own time examining the economics of JaxPort's planned deep dredge.

In a written summary of his work, Lewis points to when shippers, tired of labor unrest and other constraints, were leaving West Coast ports and looking for new homes on the East Coast.

Even with that opportunity, Lewis said, Florida's ports lost container market share while Savannah captured 100 percent of the Southeast's market share growth.

To justify JaxPort's mega-spending plan — \$700 million on the dredge itself and hundreds of millions more for other infrastructure improvements — Lewis said the container business at JaxPort would have to grow 100 percent in the first nine years after dredging.

Over the past five years, Lewis points

out, JaxPort's container traffic has grown 1 percent a year.

And a series of five-year plans for Florida's ports have contained too rosy predictions about growth in container business.

"To emphasize, Florida's container ports have not yet reached the annual container volume forecasted in the 1998 five-year plan," Lewis wrote.

JaxPort's plan also relies on the assumption that shippers will move to the mega-sized super ships that require deeper water than the shipping channel's current 40-foot depth.

As others have argued, Lewis said that's not necessarily so.

Maersk, the world's largest container shipping line, recently invested \$2.2 billion to build 16 shallow-draft vessels that can carry 8,600 standard containers and only require 39 feet of water.

Lewis said the new designs are more efficient and save 10 percent on fuel, a major cost driver for shipping companies.

JaxPort also uses the argument that the city's port will wither away without the deeper channel.

Lewis doesn't agree. "We will still have a prosperous port," he wrote.

As it is today, that success will be tied to automobiles, break bulk, chemicals, dry bulk, steel, lumber, poultry, roll-on roll-off and Puerto Rican container trade, none of which requires a deeper channel.

JaxPort's own planning documents, Lewis said, show that these trades are expected to grow by more than 20 percent from 2020 to 2035.

Lewis concluded his summary with this: "We have a successful port today, in many ways. The port is run by good people.

"The no-dredge trades are expected to grow and create jobs while producing over \$1.2 billion of tax revenue across the next 10 years.

"Ship designs are evolving, and Maersk has invested billions into a class of 8,600 TEU ships that could call on Jacksonville today, fully loaded, without dredging.

"Let's think hard before we commit a billion dollars based on a highly-aggressive plan, driven by the thought that it's our only option.

"It's not."

ron.littlepage@jacksonville.com (904) 359-4284

Gorsuch is cool, calm, mature



Kathleen Parker
Washington Post writers

Watching the Senate confirmation hearings of Supreme Court nominee Neil Gorsuch, one might easily find oneself wishing he were president of the United States.

But Gorsuch's selection to replace the late Justice Antonin Scalia is the sanest act committed by a president whose first 60 days have left him with an approval rating under 40 percent and persistent questions about his stability.

President Donald Trump should be sending champagne to Gorsuch — for life — for projecting enough grace to benefit those who haven't a knack for it. This, obviously, would include Trump and his fitful Twitter tantrums.

Imagine knowing that future generations will read about the Twitter-fevered illusionist who invented stories to distract the crowds, accusing his predecessor, Barack Obama, of wiretaps in the 2016 presidential campaign.

Testifying Monday before the House Intelligence committee, FBI Director James Comey said there is no evidence to support the president's claims. He also said that the FBI is actively investigating whether the Trump campaign had any connection to Russian operatives responsible for the hacking of the Democratic National Committee's computers, the contents of which were delivered to WikiLeaks.

Comey's remark that Russian President Vladimir Putin hated Hillary Clinton so much that he was trying to hurt her — and if it benefited Trump, fine — seemed to dispel suspicions that Trump himself had anything to do with Russia's blatant interference with U.S. elections. Who knows? Comey was careful to reveal little of his findings.

So that was Monday. Most of the focus Tuesday turned to Day 2 in Gorsuch's confirmation process. Amid much bluster and box-checking by senators on both sides of the aisle, Gorsuch continued to remind everyone why his peers, especially other judges, consider him as qualified as anyone could possibly be. Calm and unflappable throughout, Gorsuch wore the face of someone accustomed to listening

Gorsuch's hearing should reassure Americans that there are still grown-ups around who are willing to serve.

intently without betraying any predisposition or bias.

Democrats naturally had to set out their arguments for their base and spent most of their time questioning Gorsuch's independence and fairness, repeatedly trying to get him to signal whether he would vote to overturn Roe vs. Wade.

Gorsuch said nothing to appease or agitate, pointing instead to his record of participation in 2,700 lower-court rulings. He also made assurances that he takes precedent seriously, noting that Roe has been reaffirmed multiple times.

Gorsuch's stubborn (and ethical) refusal to offer opinions on precedent spoke directly to his independence.

To express an opinion, he said, would damage his credibility and perception of fairness with future litigants. It didn't seem that there was any question that would throw Gorsuch off, which is what usually happens when one is secure in the truth and confident of one's convictions.

But, importantly, all got to make their points, including the repellent Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., whose own record, frankly, should disqualify him as an arbiter of judicial integrity. Here is a man who committed one of the most craven betrayals of his generation — not sex with an intern, nor trafficking with prostitutes, but with stolen valor.

How does a man who embellishes his military career — implying that he fought in Vietnam when, in fact, he received five deferments before serving stateside — consider himself worthy to prosecute the qualifications of one of the nation's most brilliant jurists?

Not that those aren't important. Gorsuch's hearing should reassure Americans that there are still grown-ups around who are willing to serve. It was also heartening to hear him say that "No man is above the law, no man."

Email: kathleenparkerwashpost.com.

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