BUSINESS

Charleston at pre-recession shipping

Upgrades planned to allow port to handle new super-sized vessels

By Jeff Wilkinson
The State

Shipping at the port of Charleston has reached its highest level since the beginning of the Great Recession, according to Jack Ellenberg, senior vice president of the S.C. Ports Authority.

Also, the authority is spending $2 billion over the next decade for improvements to terminals, the harbor and transportation systems to grow business and prepare the port to better handle a new generation of super-sized cargo ship, Ellenberg told members of the Columbia Rotary Club.

Once dredging is completed, scheduled for late 2018, Charleston would be the only Southeastern port capable of handling the super ships around the clock.

The ships are long and deep enough to carry New York's Empire State Building, Ellenberg said, and can transport up to 7,000, 40-foot-long shipping containers.

"We're back," said Ellenberg, who as the longtime former chief recruiter for the state Department of Commerce is credited with nailing down the state's biggest economic development announcements, most recently Boeing.

"The best is ahead of us, and the worst is behind us."

Container traffic at the Charleston port grew at 9 percent in 2012-2013 and 8 percent in 2013-2014, according to an authority spokeswoman. That increase is attributed to growing populations in the Southeast for imports and South Carolina's resurgence in manufacturing for exports.

For instance, South Carolina is the nation's No. 1 exporter of tires, Ellenberg said.

In August, the port reached 93,221 pier containers for the month, about equal to March 2007, before shipping began to drop because of the economic crash, he said.

The lowest pier container volume of the recession was in June of 2009, with 50,354 containers that month. The port's all-time high was 103,809 containers in May 2005.

Business at the port should continue to rise when the bulk of the new super ships arrives, perhaps as soon as 2016 when a newly widened Panama Canal opens, Ellenberg said.