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New grant, ongoing finances discussed at Port meeting

Good news was on the agenda at Tuesday's Port Commission meeting, as updates were provided on the recently approved U. S. Economic Development Agency (EDA) grant for Port Dock 5 pier replacement and an overall positive financial picture at the Port of Newport.

Director of Finance Mark Brown updated commissioners on the grant award, including the match and reporting requirements that come with the \$1.19 million in federal investment. In addition to a 100 percent match of those dollars, the Port will provide quarterly updates on the project and semi-annual financial reports to the EDA.

General Manager Paula Miranda explained that internal systems are being put in place to stay on top of all reporting obligations and a team approach will be used to manage the project.

"Our goal, at least my goal, is that we manage this grant very well because we definitely want to go after more money for future infrastructure and this will show that we are capable of managing this type of grant," the general manager explained.

Asked about the contingency dollars built into the project's budget, Director of Operations Aaron Bretz explained that planners had an eye on areas that can sometimes generate surprises in a budget.

"Each piling is about \$10,000 a piece. We wanted to make sure that we had plenty of money in case we wound up running into problems as they are driving the pilings into the substrate beneath," he said. "There's a landing float as part of this project and there's a new electrical box. Those are two expensive areas where you can run into problems," Bretz added.

Keeping a close eye on those items and the project overall will be an outside project manager hired by the Port to oversee the pier replacement.

"Expertise in the field keeping a close eye on the contractors is going to be a big help for us," he noted.

The theme of well-managed assets continued later in the meeting, when Brown presented his monthly report on the Port's financial picture. In his written report, the director noted that most units within the Port are "exceeding expectations" in the revenue category and below budget on expenses.

"We're in really nice shape right now and moving in the right direction," he said.

Asked by Commissioner Gil Sylvia why expenses are below budget, Miranda was quick to give credit to the staff.

"Honestly, it is mostly due to our fantastic staff. The efficiencies implemented, especially by Aaron's team, have been fantastic. They've done a lot of work to do the best they can to get things nicely lean and efficient, and it's showing," she said.

Miranda also talked about the Port's commitment to the public to manage the finances appropriately, which includes collecting on overdue debts.

"Some folks weren't paying us for over a year and as much as they are local people and we want them to stay here, we don't want their boats, and we don't want to take their assets, but we also have public assets that we are managing. By not charging people properly for those assets, we're not doing our jobs. We just need those people to talk to us. If they are having difficulties, they need to come talk to us and we'll figure out a way to make it work," she said.



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In recent months, the Port has made headway on collecting overdue bills. Brown, who joined the Port staff in August, said roughly 36 percent of Port customers were 90 days or more overdue when he started his position. These days, that number is around 21 percent and dropping.

Miranda said this has been an important issue for her. "We have a duty to the public to do this right."

For more details about the EDA grant or to see financial information about the Port, visit portofnewport.com

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