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Infrastructure projects discussed at Port meeting

(Newport, OR) Port Dock 5 pier replacement efforts hit what officials hope will be a temporary delay this month, when a request for proposals for project management received no submissions, according to Port of Newport officials at Tuesday's monthly commission meeting.

General Manager Paula Miranda updated the commission, explaining "even though we had five people that came to meetings, we didn't get a bid from anyone. Apparently, people just didn't have enough folks in their business to cover this project."

The construction of a new access pier will involve driving steel pilings and topping them with concrete slabs, creating a safe, long-lasting structure that will also allow for stormwater collection, carry new electrical and fuel lines, and address other needs that the existing wooden pier couldn't meet after more than 50 years in service.

Director of Operations Aaron Bretz said time was the greatest obstacle facing the project currently. "The main problem is that we're looking to get started right way," he told the commission. The quick turn-around time wasn't allowing project management firms enough time to get the key staff on board. That shortened time frame was due in part to some of the grant administration requirements that come up in the bidding process. The U.S. Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration (EDA) has granted the Port \$1.2 million toward the project.

The specialized nature of in-water work is one reason why the Port needs to connect with the right firm. A very specific kind of construction, in-water work is highly regulated by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and can only be performed during a limited period from November 1 through February 15.

"In-water construction is more specific of a qualification," Bretz said of the project management firms, "and there are fewer of them around so they book their work further in advance and we are now at the point where it is difficult to find somebody who has that experience sitting around without a project waiting for them."

Despite the potential delay, Miranda offered reassurances. "We still have the EDA funds next year and we still have our permits for next year. We could get everything on board but not do the project until next year, but we prefer not to do that," she explained. "There is still a possibility of getting it done this year, but what we don't want to do is push to a point where people charge us a lot more money just because they think they can do so," the general manager added.

Port Commissioners also took a tentative first step at another infrastructure project at the monthly meeting. The long-delayed construction of a Port office building will get a closer look after a unanimous vote authorized Port management to move forward on getting the updated plans necessary for a reliable estimate of costs to be calculated.

"This is a project that has been in the works for over eight years when the original Port building was demolished for safety reasons and the Port was transferred to the current building that we are in today, which was supposed to be temporary," Miranda said.

The general manager noted that Port staff has grown and there is no space for additional staff, including unpaid interns. Spacing requirements due to COVID-19 have also proven tricky in the small trailer structure currently used as an office.

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“I understand there is a desire to constantly put money into other infrastructure, something that is more useable by the community and creates funds,” Miranda told the Commission, “however at some point, the Port has to build an administration building.”

With favorable interest rates, money budgeted in the current fiscal budget, and the addition of 800 square feet of rentable space, the request to the commission was to proceed only to getting plans that could yield more details on what a new building would cost.

Commission comments encouraged a cautious, slow approach to taking the project one step at a time to see if the organization could support additional debt. Once costs are known, Commissioners indicated they will revisit the conversation to talk about the Port’s debt load, other infrastructure needs, and a more detailed picture of how a new office building will create efficiencies, reduce costs and create a safer environment.

By a unanimous vote, Miranda was authorized to proceed with Capri Architecture LLC and DH Goebel, Architect, for the creation of the necessary plans and documents.

In her monthly report, the general manager also updated the Commission on efforts to identify grants to help with further infrastructure projects, as well as to offset business losses from COVID-19. To date, Miranda said the Port of Newport has actually weathered the financial storm from the pandemic better than many other ports.

“When you talk to other ports, people are losing close to a million dollars because of the type of business they have. We have been very fortunate because of the diversity of business we have here,” she said.

Port financial reports indicate that, through the end of June, the Port’s RV park and marina lost \$83,156 due to the closures resulting from the Coronavirus. Once business was allowed to re-open, the RV park has either been close to full, or on some weekends, fully occupied. The South Beach marina has also seen a robust amount of business, due in part to the extended July halibut weekends.

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