

Hueneme Pilot

The Hometown Newspaper for Channel Islands Harbor the Beach Communities and Port Hueneme

President says port needs innovation to compete

By Loran Lewis
Hueneme Pilot

Recovery and innovation are keys to the Port of Hueneme's future, Oxnard Harbor District President Jesse Ramirez told a Port Hueneme Chamber of Commerce breakfast Dec. 9.

Ramirez, who announced that he plans to retire from the district after his current term, told business and city leaders that, while the port had suffered setbacks, "We're not doing as badly as the newspapers have indicated."

The board of commissioners president said the port in the past year had invested \$5 million in the Hueneme Beach Seawall, but more importantly, had completed the joint dredging project among the district, Corps of Engineers and Naval Base Ventura County.

"For the longest time we wanted to clean the port," Ramirez said. "It took years of research and working with the Navy. Finally, this year, it all culminated."

The American Association of Port Authorities gave the port an award of excellence for the project.

To remain competitive, the port has to be innovative. The Port of San Diego has become the primary competitor for the types of business traditionally associated with the Port of Hueneme. The Dole Food Company, which used to ship to Hueneme, now uses San Diego, Ramirez said. He said San Diego has some advantages over Hueneme.

"San Diego has hotels; every time somebody sleeps there, they make money," he said. "(San Diego) also makes money from real estate."

In comparison, "if there are no ships in our port, we're not making money," Ramirez said. "Really, our major means of support is those lovely bananas." The port currently handles shipping for Del Monte Fresh Produce and Chiquita Brands International.

The economy and overall reduction in trade has had a significant financial impact. The port's practical capacity is 1.5 million tons; its highest actual capacity was 1.4 million tons in 2006. Through September, the port had handled 550,000 tons of cargo. Dockside labor man-hour wages dropped from about \$18.9 million in 2006 to about \$6.9 million for three-quarters of 2009.

One benefit of Hueneme is its location, Ramirez said. “We’re blessed strategically. We’re in a beautiful spot.” He also cited the port’s labor pool as a competitive advantage.

The port has set its sights on innovation as one means of staying up with the competition. That includes applying for a grant to invest in new infrastructure for the port and to encourage development of a shipping system that would use barges based in the port rather than the state highways.