

PortMiami: Good for growth, good for business

Reps. Frederica S. Wilson and Mario Diaz-Balart
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In this age of so much partisan disagreement, there's one big priority everyone can proudly share.

We'll give you a hint: It's just a few blocks east of downtown.

PortMiami — in so many ways — symbolizes the shared goals to which both Democrats and Republicans can aspire. Our port means high-paying jobs for workers, growth for businesses, foreign trade and cross-cultural connections. This week, as the port begins its most important upgrade in a generation, we all have something to celebrate.

PortMiami supports 207,000 jobs and \$27 billion worth of annual economic activity. And these figures are just the start. Thanks to joint efforts of local, state, and federal players, PortMiami is undergoing a series of upgrades to vastly expand its capacity in the coming years.

These upgrades include a deep dredge and new super-sized cranes to ensure that the port is "Big Ship Ready" when the expanded Panama Canal opens

in 2015 and a new class of "Post-Panamax" mega cargo liners hit the high seas. PortMiami is the only Eastern Seaboard port south of Norfolk, Va., that will meet the 50-foot depth required to accommodate the new ships when they begin passing through the expanded Panama Canal. This means our area will be well-positioned to win new job-creating trade opportunities with booming Asian and Latin American markets.

The upgrades also include a new port tunnel, scheduled for completion in May 2014, and a new on-port rail link. The tunnel will allow port traffic to move more quickly and easily to and from the interstate highway system, reducing downtown traffic while enabling expanded port operations. The new rail link, made possible through a partnership with Florida East Coast Railway, will allow cargo shipments arriving in Miami to reach over 70 percent of the U.S. population in less than four days' transit time.

Finally, the upgrades include more than \$10 million in

improvements to cruise terminals. PortMiami recently welcomed the addition of Disney Cruise Line's Disney Magic, and plans to add more ships in the weeks and months ahead. Already the world's busiest cruise port, PortMiami is expected to soon set a world record of five million cruise passengers in a single year.

All this will transform our local economy. But nothing this big comes easy.

We've had to work diligently for federal approval of these upgrades, and the effort continues. Thanks to leadership from Gov. Rick Scott, Democratic and Republican state legislators, Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez, PortMiami Director Bill Johnson and others, the upgrades are moving forward — with the vast majority of funding coming from state and local coffers.

Given that this is an issue of national economic competitiveness, we believe the federal government should pay its fair share. We also believe that other Florida ports — like Fort

Lauderdale's Port Everglades and Jacksonville's JaxPort, which likewise make significant contributions to our economy — deserve speedy federal authorization for key upgrades. These improvements are essential to ensure that we Floridians do not lose our competitive advantage to other states and foreign ports when the new megaships start sailing through the Panama Canal.

This year, we joined together to co-found the bipartisan Florida Ports Caucus in the U.S. House of Representatives to jointly advocate for Florida's 15 public seaports and the 680,000 direct and indirect jobs that they mean for the state. Our congressional working group has already had real success. We've brought together local state, and national leaders and pressed federal agencies including the Army Corps of Engineers for needed support. The Florida Ports Caucus played an important role in the passage of the House Water Resources Reform and Development Act, which was an important step toward readying our ports for the Panama Canal expansion. When the new fully loaded Post-Panamax ships set sail in 2015, we're confident that Florida will be ready.

While we represent parties that are so often at odds, we're united on the priority of creating high-paying jobs for Floridians. And we're united in believing that one of the surest paths to creating these jobs runs through PortMiami.

Frederica Wilson represents Florida District 24 in the U.S. House of Representatives. Mario Diaz-Balart represents District 25.