

District Executive Director Steps Down

William J. "Bill" Buenger, who has headed the Port of Hueneme through a decade-long expansion that saw cargo and revenues increase by more than 50 percent, announced his retirement at the end of April.

Although several Board members indicated that Buenger had been talking about stepping down for more than a year he did not make his decision public until late February.

Mr. Buenger first took the reigns as the Harbor District's Executive Director in 1994. By 1998 the Port broke the 1,000,000 ton threshold for the first time, a figure the port has topped every year since. The district operates the port of Hueneme, the only deep-water commercial harbor between Los Angeles and the Bay Area. The port annually competes for the state's number 4 ranking for general cargo tonnage. The Ports of LA, Long Beach and Oakland are the state's top three.

Buenger, whose tenure with the Harbor District lasted 18 years, is stepping down to spend more time with his wife Barbara and their family. Long-running controversies over the port's efforts to expand, he added, did not figure in his decision.

After nine years of on again, off again negotiations Buenger was finally able to conclude a Joint-Use Agreement in 2001 with the United States Navy for commercial use of Navy Wharf number 3, an agreement which has netted Navy Base Ventura County more than \$1,000,000 for local base maintenance. He's worked since then to expand the Joint-Use Agreement to better accommodate the growing international trade that has brought the world's products to Ventura County's doorstep.

"Unfinished business is what's held me up from retiring earlier," said Buenger. "Issues that I would like to have resolved kept getting pushed back and pretty soon a year's gone by and you say, well, you've just got to draw the line." One Harbor Commissioner said board members talked Buenger out of retiring earlier.

With Pacific Rim trade increasing exponentially, growing numbers of shippers want to use the 130-acre port, but it is built out. Some 350 ships call at Hueneme annually, bringing more than 1 million metric tons of cargo including some 280,000 vehicles manufactured in Europe and Asia. The port is the West Coast's leading banana gateway (# 2 nationally), and the country's biggest exporter of citrus fruit.

Independent economic studies credit the port's operations with generating 3,800 jobs and \$535 million for Ventura County's economy. The harbor has undergone an unprecedented expansion since Buenger became executive director in 1994. The port is proud to have such world class shipping lines as NYKLauritzenCool, Great White Fleet, Wallenius Wilhelmsen Lines NYK Line and more serving the port. Equally impressive is the extraordinary list of District customers such as BMW, Jaguar, Land Rover, Mazda, Mitsubishi, Hyundai, Kia, Saab, Suzuki, Volvo, Chiquita, Del Monte and the Sunkist Growers.

The port has also established two sister port relationships, one with the Port of Helsingborg, Sweden and the second with the Port of Qinhuangdao in China.

"I'm saddened that he's leaving; he's not only been an outstanding Port Director but a good friend as well," said Commissioner Michael Plisky. "I've learned a lot about the port industry from Bill, he's highly respected nationwide by his peers. "

"We stalled his decision for as long as we could," said Commissioner Jesse Ramirez. "He wants to travel and spend time with Barbara. We'll miss him but he deserves a little down time."

Bill is a 43 year veteran of the maritime industry. As a graduate of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point, N.Y., he sailed for many years as a commissioned Line Officer aboard numerous merchant marine cargo ships. Following his military service he joined States Steamship Company as Cargo Operations manager before heading up Lykes Bros. Steamship Company's Pacific Division. He was also the West Coast Operations Manager for Container Stevedoring Company. His last posting before coming to the Port of Hueneme, was as the Port of San Francisco's chief wharfinger. He is the longest-serving cargo port director in California.

The Alumni Foundation of the United States Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, New York recently recognized Mr. Buenger with its Outstanding Professional Achievement award, presented to an alumni of the Academy or the Cadet Corps who, in the judgment of the Alumni Awards Committee, best exemplifies the finest tradition of the Corps' motto "Acta Non Verba" by attaining personal achievement in their chosen field thus lending honor and prestige to the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy.

Buenger has served on the boards of numerous maritime industry organizations, while locally he is on the board of the Ventura County Economic Development Association, the Pacific Agribusiness Alliance, the World Affairs Council and the World Trade Center Association.

The Harbor District has begun a search for a successor, but it could be at least three to four months before one takes over. Commissioner Jess Herrera said, "During his tenure at the district, Bill has been an effective executive. He successfully faced some of the most difficult and challenging issues in our history, his leadership, dedication and work ethic will be hard to duplicate."

Buenger and his wife have been married 43 years and have three adult children and two grandchildren. They plan to stay in Camarillo, he said.

Friends, supporters, family, as well as industry peers gathered at a gala retirement party held in Buenger's honor last week at the Embassy Suites hotel at Mandalay Beach where Buenger was presented by the United States Coast Guard with their Emeritus Service award. Additional presentations were made by the Marine Exchange of California, the State of California, the Governor's office, VECEDA and more.