

# Unloading a recovery

## *Port of Hueneme expects more gains in ship traffic*

BY STEPHEN NELLIS

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In the conference room where the Oxnard Harbor District meets, the portraits of 22 former commissioners hang on the wall. They are all men, and the next two to go up will be, too.

But that will change. On Jan. 10, Mary Anne Rooney was sworn in as one of two new commissioners.

It was a pivotal night for the district, which oversees the Port of Hueneme, the only deepwater port between Los Angeles and San Francisco and a major importer of cars and bananas on the West Coast. In November, the district's voters elected Jason Hodge and Rooney, the first time in 16 years that two commissioners were chosen in the same election.

The port was hit hard by the recession but has notched some gains in recent months. In November, automobile imports were up 43 percent year-over-year, to 19,753 revenue tons, the measure the port uses for tracking activity. The figure was up 17.8 percent year-over-year in December, but the port still projects a \$1.4 million loss on \$10.4 million in revenue this fiscal year.

In her first board meeting, Rooney moved quickly to drill down on costs on seemingly routine items. She asked why a planned memorial to the collaboration between longshoremen and the U.S. Navy



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**A ship docked at the Port of Hueneme last year. Port officials say automobile imports were up 17.8 percent in December from the previous year.**

was taking so long and had no set timeline. She pushed to move a policy rewrite on the evaluation of district staff to the top of the work pile. And she suggested condensing the district's two monthly meetings into one to save on preparation and printing costs.

"For businesses, we know that when they have a business plan they tend to be more successful," Rooney said after the

meeting. "The same thing applies to the Oxnard Harbor District."

Rooney also said she wants to see more local businesses use the port. She currently works with Ventura County manufacturers through the Economic Development Collaborative-Ventura County.

"We need to bring revenues back up,"

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she said. "I think there's a great opportunity to expand exports."

Albert Sierra, a dockworker with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union who has been at the Port of Hueneme for 31 years and attended the meeting on Jan. 10, voiced similar goals.

He said he would like to see the new board go after relationships with brands such as Mercedes and Dole Food Co. Bananas from Del Norte and Chiquita arrive early in the week, and there are still open docks later in the week, he said.

Sierra said he would also like to see more exports to China, where port workers have been sending cars made by General Motors. "That's a pending market that we can tap into," Sierra said. "I would love to see that expand to no end."

Board members would love to make that happen, but the port is surrounded by the city of Port Hueneme and Naval Base Ventura County. They say it will take careful coordination with those groups and the county to free up the space needed to bring on new customers and use docks to full capacity.

"If we were a farm, I think they'd be studying us to find out how we get so much productivity out of so small a space," said board president and newly re-elected Commissioner Jess Herrera. "It's not rocket science. It's just that we need places to grow to acquire new customers."

Hodge, the other newly minted board member, said he plans to court potential customers to keep revenues up during the downturn. For one thing, he said, Port Hueneme offers more personalized customer service than a bigger port such as Long Beach. "Anyone who wants to bring a fair capacity through here is a big fish in our pond," he said.

Other goals, Hodge said, include finishing a system to help meet new air pollution regulations. In a few years, ships will no longer be allowed to idle their diesel engines to produce power. Port Hueneme is working on a way to supply power from onshore that could also reduce the carbon footprint of other small ports.

"We're taking a very technological approach to getting our ships off idling diesel," Hodge said. "Hopefully, this technology will be used across the country and the world."

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**Rooney**



**Hodge**