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City Controller's Report Examines Philadelphia's Competitiveness Among East Coast Ports

Assessment tracks cargo demand, vessel size and competition to grow

PHILADELPHIA – As the Port of Philadelphia (PhilaPort) positions the city and state for long-term investments and growth along the Delaware River, the Philadelphia City Controller's Office conducted a review to evaluate the opportunities, challenges and best practices implemented by other major East Coast ports.

As indicated in PhilaPort's Destination 2040 report that was issued in 2024, container demand is projected to increase substantially over the next 14 years. Accommodating larger vessels through the main waterway is critical to supporting future cargo growth. The main shipping channel of the Delaware River has a depth of 45 feet. It is less than many of the other competitive ports along the coast including:

Port	Operator	Channel Depth
Port of Virginia	Virginia Port Authority	55 Feet
Port of Charleston	South Carolina Port Authority	52 Feet
Port of Baltimore	Maryland Port Administration	50 Feet
Port of New York and New Jersey	Port Authority of New York and New Jersey	50 Feet
Port of Boston	Massachusetts Port Authority	47 – 50 Feet

"Virginia, Baltimore and Charleston continue to invest in deeper and wider navigation channels capable of accommodating larger container ships," said Philadelphia City Controller Christy Brady. "While expanding the navigation channels is just one component of an effective port system, these ports demonstrate how channel improvements can strengthen long-term competitiveness."

PhilaPort supports approximately 12,000 direct and indirect jobs, generates an estimated $1.5 billion in annual economic output, and contributes approximately $321 million in total tax impact. There are three districts, Northern, Central and Southern, along the Delaware River operated by PhilaPort that handle the movement of goods. Each district serves a distinct role in operations based on its infrastructure, available land, and the types of cargo they are designed to handle.

Through its Destination 2040 Plan, PhilaPort proposes a series of capital investments and operational improvements across the three districts through a two-phased approach. The initiatives include but are not limited to:

- building new warehouses,
- improving docks to support heavier equipment,
- exploring the addition of a liquefied natural gas storage and fueling facility,
- redeveloping aging piers,
- expanding container and automobile capacity,
- stabilizing the shoreline, and
- strengthening roadway and rail infrastructure

According to Brady, each port has different operational needs and our review found that successful long-term strategies from competitive ports share many similarities. This includes improvements and investments in intermodal transportation, terminal modernization, environmental sustainability, and diversified operations.

The City Controller's report highlights key areas of focus informed by initiatives undertaken by other competitive ports:

- **Coordinating Infrastructure Investments:** Charleston, Virginia, and New York and New Jersey demonstrated that expanding terminals, improving road and rail access, and deepening navigation channels are most effective when planned together.
- **Transportation Connectivity:** Boston, New York and New Jersey, and Virginia's rail improvements illustrated how efficient connections between terminals, highways and rail networks improve cargo movement and reduce congestion.
- **Diversify Operations:** Several ports have expanded beyond traditional container operations by investing in cruise terminals, energy infrastructure, and specialized cargo facilities.
- **Environmental Sustainability:** Several ports are investing in renewable energy, habitat restoration, emissions reduction and other sustainability efforts.

"PhilaPort's Destination 2040 reflects many of these same priorities, but timely implementation will be critical," said Brady. "As competing ports continue to make significant investments, delaying implementation increases the risk that future cargo growth will be captured elsewhere."

"Achieving the goals set forth by PhilaPort will be essential if Philadelphia is going to capitalize on its strategic location and remain competitive for decades ahead."

The City Controller's report can be viewed at https://controller.phila.gov/

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