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Port of Tampa leaders unsure how strongly to pursue Cuba ties

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Port Tampa Bay should be actively courting Cuba ahead of its competitors or risk getting left in the dust, some community leaders say. The port's CEO, however, defends a lack of travel to Cuba, saying there is no inaction on the port's part in preparing for trade with the island nation.

TAMPA — Community leaders, excited over the prospect that Cuba and Tampa will reconnect through business, are concerned that officials running the region's biggest economic engine are idling instead of jetting to Cuba to lay the groundwork for future trade.

Port Tampa Bay should be actively courting the island nation ahead of its competitors or risk getting left in the dust, they say.

With President Barack Obama working to knock down the wall of sanctions built against Cuba when Communist dictator Fidel Castro took control more than 50 years ago, now is the time to move, they say.

Some claim it's all about politics, that port President and CEO Paul Anderson isn't making any direct moves for fear of backlash from political allies who oppose fully opening up trade with Cuba.

Former Tampa Councilwoman Mary Mulhern recalled a conversation she had with Anderson in 2010, shortly after he came to Port Tampa Bay, when she broached the topic of Cuba with him. "Anderson immediately said something like, 'I know all about Cuba; I'm good friends with Diaz-Balart.'" She was referring to U.S. Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, a South Florida congressman who has been working to keep trade restrictions in place between the U.S. and Cuba and stop ferries and cruises from going to the island.

“He said this as a positive, and it was an indication to me that he would not be doing anything about Cuba.”

Port officials are pushing back against that notion and any notion that the port is not preparing for a new day with Cuba.

Anderson, during a short phone call with the Tribune last week, defended the port’s lack of travel to Cuba, saying there is no inaction on the port’s part in preparing for trade. To the contrary, he said, it is more about protecting the port’s business strategy.

Anderson didn’t respond directly to a Tribune request for comment on the theory that politics are holding him back, and his senior adviser called that a silly concept. Anderson has friends on both sides of the aisle in Congress whom he works with regularly, said port senior adviser Ed Miyagishima.



Port officials have been invited on all three trips the Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce has made to Cuba in recent years, including one that just took place. They have declined each invitation.

Those trips are more about culture and education than about establishing business relations, Miyagishima said.

On the recent chamber trip, delegates met with the director of the Port of Mariel, which is being rebuilt as a high-tech port, a hub for global trade and commerce. The port director showed the Tampa delegation a map with arrows pointing from Cuba to the Florida ports of Miami, Port Everglades and Jacksonville. Port Tampa Bay was conspicuously absent.

“It raised concerns with our group when we saw that map,” said Tampa chamber President Bob Rohrlack. “We realized we need to step up our efforts on telling them why Tampa is a great location to do business. They are very open to working with our port. They definitely want to engage.”

Rohrlack said the chamber is all for having Port Tampa Bay in the mix when the Port of Mariel becomes part of a network of Gulf ports where enormous post-Panamax ships — ships designed to traverse an expanded Panama Canal — will offload onto smaller ships bound for berths in Florida and elsewhere.



“We are keeping our cards close to our chest,” Anderson said. “We are not out there telling the world our business strategy. I understand that it might have been sexy and appealing to go on a trip to Cuba with the chamber, but we want to make sure when we do go down there we can have a constructive, structured dialog with the right people.”

In fact, he said, he thinks he already has done that by meeting in Tampa on Jan. 30, 2014, with Cuba's highest-ranking diplomat, Cuban Interests Section Ambassador José Ramón Cabañas Rodríguez. Jesus Perez, first secretary of the Cuban Interests Section, and U.S. Rep. Kathy Castor were also at the meeting, he said. They laid out all that the port has to offer, Anderson said.

Much of the work to establish business between Cuba's port and here will be up to private shipping companies, not Port Tampa Bay, Miyagishima said. "The port's responsibility as the largest economic engine in central Florida is to create an environment so the private sector can flourish. We look to the private sector" to lay the groundwork that will make that happen.

A string of emails sent back and forth between port officials and various private businesses, publications and government officials during the past year shows that the port has been seeking business topics related to Cuba and attending seminars across the state. They also show the port's interest in accommodating a ferry service between Tampa and Cuba.

In several of the emails, released last week to The Tampa Tribune under a public records request, port officials talk about preparations for a ferry berth at Port Tampa Bay. One email refers to an article published in the Tribune in which Tampa Port Authority Commissioner Patrick Allman speaks of the day when a ferry might haul cars and cattle from Tampa to Havana.

"I wonder if he is aware that the consultants are pooh-poohing (sic) the idea because of the cost of rebuilding the slip," writes Wade Elliott, vice president of marketing and business development, in a June 2014 email to Bob Callahan, the port's vice president of development.

In an email dated May 6, Elliott sent a link to Callahan for an article on the U.S. allowing ferries to begin operating between Tampa and Cuba. "We're going to need those CBP (U.S. Customs & Border Patrol) ferry guidelines and a terminal plan to accommodate them sooner than we thought," he wrote.

The emails also refer to an interest in possible cruise ship traffic between Tampa and Cuba but note that Cuba probably isn't prepared to handle full-size cruise ships.

If a ferry service wants to operate out of Port Tampa Bay for trips to Cuba, there is space available off Channelside Drive right now, Miyagishima said.



At least a handful of U.S. ferry services have been approved by the U.S. government for the Cuba run, and officials from Port Manatee, just south of Port Tampa Bay, have been vocal about their desire to get in on that action. Jorge Fernandez, the operator for Havana Ferry Partners, which is licensed for ferry service with Cuba, has said Port Manatee is his top choice. But neither he nor Port Manatee director Carlos Buqueras will say whether they are in discussions to establish such a service.

That service, when established, should be in Tampa, said Tampa Councilwoman Yvonne Capin. She said she brought it up at a council meeting when the ferries were first approved. She said she asked where the port stood on the issue. “No one knew. But I think most agree they belong here.” She said Tampa residents have been vocal about their desire for such a service.

Tampa Port Authority Vice Chairman Carl Lindell Jr. said he was assured by Anderson last week that space is available for a ferry.

“We have to play by the rules,” Lindell said. “We’d love to just ignore all that. We are kind of stuck between what we’d like to do and what we are allowed do.” He said port officials “are concerned about appearances,” about overstepping the embargo that will remain in place until Congress lifts it.

“When that happens, when the embargo is lifted, we will be so competitive,” Lindell said.

After returning from a personal humanitarian trip to Cuba in 2009, Lindell was very vocal about the need for the port to get to Cuba and establish a relationship. He since has tweaked his message.

“The port is doing a lot of things behind the scenes,” he said. “We are prepared.”

On his trips to Cuba, Lindell said, he had unofficial discussions about future business there. “Cuba isn’t the problem,” he said. “Congress is the problem. The embargo is out of step with the American public, 70 percent of which thinks it is way out of line.

“We want to do business with Cuba,” Lindell said. “And certainly, we wouldn’t hire an administrator that didn’t want to do business with Cuba.” For now, though, the trade door is only ajar, he said.

Anderson said Cuba is part of Port Tampa Bay’s “hemispheric strategy,” which includes trade with Chile, Colombia, Brazil and the Dominican Republic. “We are spending a lot of travel time, resources and strategic planning on growing all of our Latin American business,” which includes meeting with a lot of private companies already doing business with Cuba, he said.

“We are fully prepared.”



This latest Cuba intoxication began Dec. 17 when Obama announced he would normalize relations with Cuba by easing trade and travel restrictions. Airline flights from Tampa International Airport picked up, and so did the conversation in offices and on the streets in a city with the third largest Cuban population in the country, after Miami and New York City.

But much of it is just that, an intoxication, port officials say. There is still an embargo in place that restricts U.S. businesses from trading with Cuba except on a very limited basis. The United States first implemented an embargo against Cuba in 1961. President Bill Clinton codified that

embargo in 1996 with the Helms-Burton Act, which means it will take an act of Congress to lift it.

Obama's restrictions didn't loosen enough to allow a rash of new business opportunities. There are 12 categories under which people can travel to Cuba without a license from the federal Office of Foreign Assets Control.

But rules for granting travel to Cuba do allow for Port Tampa Bay or any business to apply for a special license for travel to the island nation, said Hagar Chemali, a spokeswoman for OFAC.

"For any travel that falls outside those 12 categories, the officials can apply for a specific license, which would be reviewed on a case-by-case basis," Chemali said.



"If it were open right now, I'd jump on the next plane," said Stephen Swindal Jr., chairman of the Tampa Port Authority. But the port has to operate within the confines of the law, he said. "Our infrastructure is such that we are prepared." Port Tampa Bay will be an ideal spot for a ferry between Florida and Cuba and is prepared to make that happen, he said.

That being said, Swindal said he thinks a lot of people have become preoccupied with Cuba since Obama made the announcement in December to loosen restrictions on travel and trade with that country.

"At times, people have become obsessed with Cuba," he said. "Obviously, they need goods and services. Is it going to be our salvation? No. Will it add business for the port? Absolutely."

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