Taking care of business

By CHRIS FRINK
Westside bureau

PORT ALLEN — With money in the bank and an effort to diversify its tenants and markets, Port of Greater Baton Rouge Director Roger Richard said the port will enter the 21st century looking toward a rosy future.

The port is centered on a 370-acre complex that sprawls along the Mississippi River's west bank on both sides of the Interstate 10 bridge in Port Allen. Linked to the Gulf of Mexico by a federally maintained channel in the river, it is the farthest inland of any deepwater port on the river.

It's connected to the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway, three major railroads and has 17 miles of its own rail track.

Thanks to a $9 million bond issue and a $10 million property sale, the port can afford much-needed repairs and have money left in reserve for emergencies and to fund other repairs and expansions, Richard said.

The bond issue also allows the port to retire $2.5 million in older, higher-interest debt, overlay roads, re-roof some of the 462,000 square feet of warehouse space and repair its administration building, he said. The port's oldest warehouse needs major work on the pilings that hold it above the river.

"There's money now for the future. We're taking care of our immediate needs and have cash on hand for the long term," he said. Part of the long-term planning includes having money available to participate in state programs that require the port to put up 10 percent of the cost of approved projects.

Richard said he is also looking to the future and wants the port to fund a new master plan to set goals for the next 15 years.

A possible expansion could be a new "special projects" dock built under the I-10 bridge that could handle large cargoes — like refineries or mills — that would be built in sections elsewhere and assembled at the port for shipment overseas, Richard said. "Baton Rouge is in a perfect place for that, with transportation on the river, interstate and railroads."

When Georgia-Pacific Corp. recently shut down some of its production lines in a nearby mill, the port lost much of the forest products it once shipped and is looking to diversify its cargoes, Richard said.

One of the port's newest tenants, a rice processor building a plant in a port warehouse north of the I-10 bridge, represents a new kind of business for the port, Richard said. Louisiana Grain will buy rice in Louisiana, Arkansas and Missouri, then ship it by barge to the port, where it will be processed and bagged for sale, mostly to domestic retail markets, he said.

"We're going to make money on it, and they're going to move tonnage through the port," Richard said.

The port just signed a lease with Associated Terminals to use its new state-of-the-art $1 million terminal and warehouse built on port land along the Intracoastal just to the southwest of the main port facility. "They can handle any type of product at the warehouse," Richard said.

Thomas Pipe, the largest pipecoating company in the United States, recently decided to build a facility adjacent to the port's Intracoastal terminal and could be a customer for Associated Terminals, Richard said.

Current port tenants are also expanding, Richard said. Apex Oil Co., which already has several large storage tanks at the port, plans to build new tanks to hold asphalt liquids. Funded by $900,000 in state and port money, the molasses factory in the port is also expanding.

Richard is a New Orleans native who took the port's top job a year ago after running the port in Orange, Texas, for 10 years. He wants to beef up the port's efforts in public relations and community economic development.

"We're going to be a player and a partner" with local governments in finding ways to develop the economy, Richard said.