



## Eastern, county 'working relationship' arrives

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Brian D'Isernia noted that his Eastern Shipbuilding and Gulf County have been neighbors for more than four decades.

Monday, with a ground-breaking along the former paper mill bulkhead in Port St. Joe, D'Isernia said the company and county were now entering into a "working relationship."

The turning of dirt, with county and Port Authority officials joined by those from the St. Joe Company and Eastern Shipbuilding, marked the beginning of the process of "transforming this virgin piece of land" into an outfitting and maintenance facility in Gulf County, D'Isernia said.

It also signaled the arrival of Eastern into Port St. Joe nearly five years after the company's expansion was announced, during which time Eastern has leased 20 acres along the mill site bulkhead from the St. Joe Company.

"It's been a long haul," said St. Joe Company CEO Jorge Gonzalez. "Sometimes it felt like one step forward, one step back.

"There is nothing more important to us than creating jobs, quality jobs, in the counties where we are. That's good business for us."

Monday's event, said Warren Yeager, director of the Gulf County Economic Development Coalition, was the result of a "lot of people in a lot of places with a lot of involvement and a vision."

A vision, he added, far different than 20 years ago as the Arizona Chemical plant was headed toward closure, following several chemical companies and the St. Joe Paper Company out of town.

With the arrival of Gonzalez at the head of St. Joe, Yeager continued, the page turned on the relationship between the county and the company that owns key properties in Gulf County and takes its name from the community of Port St. Joe.

“Jorge had a commitment to Gulf County from the get-go,” Yeager said. “He takes Gulf County to heart.

“When he took leadership of St. Joe, it was a new day.”

That new day now includes Eastern, which is moving into Gulf County initially with a boost from the Florida Legislature.

D’Isernia thanked lawmakers for the 2017 \$6 million appropriation to the county to facilitate the creation of the outfitting yard.

Those funds include \$1 million for dredging.

At the facility, vessels will arrive as mostly hull and motors and whatever is needed to sail, said a company representative in February.

The company has a contract with New York City for three 300-foot long “Staten Island” ferries, with the first hull under construction, D’Isernia said, and potentially arriving in Port St. Joe the middle of next year.

Outfitting a vessel could take as long as 18 months.

The facility will also allow Eastern to begin to establish a full-time vessel maintenance presence in a key geographical location.

But it is just a foot in the door of a larger opportunity to create a dry dock facility in Port St. Joe, the next step in the working relationship with the county, D’Isernia noted.

The dry dock, 120-feet by 425-feet, will be constructed by Eastern and owned jointly by the county and Port St. Joe Port Authority, under an application submitted to Triumph Gulf Coast two weeks ago.

Eastern would lease the dry dock facility.

That expansion is part of Eastern's effort to fulfill a Coast Guard contract for 25 offshore cutters.

The contract is potentially worth \$10.5 billion.

Eastern won the contract over companies in Maine, Louisiana and Mississippi, all of them larger in workforce and bottom line.

It was, D'Isernia and Gonzalez noted Monday, something of "David vs. Goliath" story.

The BOCC and Eastern are seeking \$28 million in funding from Triumph Gulf Coast, the organization charged with disbursing more than \$1 billion in BP fine dollars over a 15-year period.

According to the application submitted to Triumph, the dry dock project is estimated to create 240 direct jobs with another 624 indirect jobs

"The Coast Guard contract is not only important for national security, but it is important in creating jobs, jobs for Port St. Joe, for Gulf County as well as Bay County," D'Isernia said.