

It's final. It's here'

Homeport project marks official groundbreaking

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South Beach site of the new homeport for the NOAA Pacific research fleet. An estimated 500 folks turned out for the historic occasion. NOAA officials expect to berth the fleet at the site beginning June 1, 2011. (Photos by Terry Dillman)

Port of Newport staff and commissioners, past and present, unveil a welcome banner to display when the community greets two of the six vessels from the NOAA Pacific research fleet that will soon call Newport home. The vessel Miller Freeman is expected to arrive at 1 p.m. Saturday for an overnight port call as part of its current West Coast survey with scientists from Newport aboard. The Bell M. Shimada, the fleet's newest addition, is expected about 9:30 a.m. Sunday, also making a mid-cruise port call.

With a cast of hundreds and on-going construction work providing an appropriate soundtrack, Port of Newport officials staged the climactic scene of their play for luring the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Pacific research fleet to Yaquina Bay.

An estimated 500 folks gathered Thursday morning at the five-acre site - located across from Oregon State University's Hatfield Marine Science Center and adjacent to the South Beach Marina - for an official groundbreaking ceremony. The event essentially ended months of speculation over whether or not efforts by Washington state officials to scuttle the move would succeed or fail. "It's official. It's final. It's here," Ginny Goblirsch, president of the port's board of commissioners, stated emphatically, drawing a roar of approval and a rousing round of applause. Goblirsch referred to a public notice released by NOAA officials Wednesday, announcing their final determination (see related story) that there is "no practicable alternative" to the port's lease awarded

in August 2009.

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.), who was among the cast of local, state, and federal officials on hand, reiterated the finding.

"The notice says final determination. Final determination. Final determination," he said "You won it the way you ought to do it - free and fair." Wyden noted that when Port of Newport officials first announced their intentions to present a proposal for bringing the fleet to Newport, "skeptics thought they were a few fish short of their limit."

Instead, Newport is less than 12 months away from having a new facility and docks ready for the NOAA fleet and personnel. Sweet sensation

Folks who remembered the 1950s television series "The Honeymooners," with Jackie Gleason in his role as irascible bus driver Ralph Kramden, used one of his trademark phrases to describe the occasion: "How sweet it is!" Some added another Gleason trademark phrase, "And aw-a-a a-y we go!" in referring to the homeport construction effort that's already well under way.

"This was no accident," said Don Mann, the port's general manager. "Such milestones are not achieved by one person or one idea. It takes many people and ideas." In the end, this effort, he noted, would establish a legacy for future generations. Goblirsch referred to support from local leaders and the public for "giving up short-term gain for long-term goals" in backing the efforts to continue to develop the South Beach peninsula "into a world class group of marine research and education facilities.

That support began the transformation with HMSC and the Oregon Coast Aquarium. Add in the aquarium science program at Oregon Coast Community College, the pending construction of the new Marine Mammal Institute at HMSC thanks to an infusion of state funding, the fledging Ocean Observatories Initiative, with Newport as a key facility site at the southern end of an array of scientific equipment that will ultimately monitor climate change, and more, and the foundation is already in place for a quantum leap forward in marine research and education. Goblirsch referred to the 100-year lease the port signed more than 40 years ago with OSU "at very favorable rates" - something the community chose to support. "It has paid off immensely," she noted.

Berthing the NOAA fleet in South Beach will only enhance all those possibilities. Foundation

Gov. Ted Kulongoski quipped that he realized just how big Thursday's event was when he saw Lincoln County Commissioner Terry Thompson fully decked out in suit and tie. And, he added, when was the last time so many senior government officials showed up

all at the same time in Newport?

In addition to the governor, the who's who list featured U.S. senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, U.S. representatives Kurt Schrader and David Wu, members of Oregon's Coastal Caucus, and a pod of local government officials and other dignitaries. While all of them played vital roles in netting the NOAA fleet, Kulongoski also paid homage to the community itself.

"This is really more about the citizens of this community than anybody else," he said. "You were the ones who really made this day possible. As important as it is today, the real interest for all should be about what this means for our future." He called it "a landmark event for this state," noting that the research and development that could ultimately evolve from bringing in the NOAA research fleet "will not only put Newport on the map, it will put Oregon on the map."

The facility could help transform South Beach into an international hub for research and development on ocean health, a key component in climate change and the entire planet's future.

Merkley said the area is already off to "a terrific start" with HMSC and the aquarium, and the research possible with the NOAA fleet homeport in Newport's backyard would take things "to a whole new level."

He called the homeport site "a perfect fit" for NOAA, which already has a presence in a central location that allows them quick, easy access to the ocean, and from which they can fan out in any direction for exploration purposes. Schrader talked about HMSC's potential for becoming "the Woods Hole of the West," a reference to the renowned Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Massachusetts.

OSU President Ed Ray took it one step farther, noting somewhat tongue-in-cheek that maybe in a generation or two, it would become "Wood's Who?" Hatfield and Wood's Hole scientists often collaborate on research projects.

And it was similar collaborative efforts that landed the NOAA fleet in Newport. Unified front

Wu said Astoria's ultimate withdrawal from consideration as the homeport site allowed Oregon to present "a unified proposal" and the federal delegation to present a unified front in supporting it.

"This is a harbinger of great things to come," said Wu, noting that the knowledge, science, and technology aboard the NOAA ships and those who use them will help build a brighter future for Oregon, the nation, and the world. Innovation, he added, "is the lifeblood of Oregon and America."

"We didn't know if we could do it, but we knew we had to put all the pieces together to make it

possible," said state Rep. Jean Cowan (D-Newport). They did gather all the pieces, using what Lincoln County Commissioner Bill Hall dubbed as "a true grassroots effort" built on "an audacious vision."

Hall referred to the nearly \$20 million in lottery funds the state put up to sweeten the deal and make the lease economically viable for NOAA.

"It seemed appropriate to use gambling funds on another gamble," he quipped. "But what a smart wager and payoff."

Within a generation, he suggested, when someone mentions Wood's Hole, maybe they'll refer to it as "the Newport of the East."

Ray called the effort "one of those overnight successes that started 48 years ago" with the establishment of HMSC.

NOAA has partnered with HMSC for the past 30 years.

"We invested time, talents, and resources for decades to get to this point," Ray noted. "When we collaborate and work together cooperatively, we can compete against anybody, anywhere. What we do is world class."

Construction on the \$38-million project began in January and is scheduled for completion by the end of May 2011. NOAA is leasing the site from the port under a 20-year lease at \$2.4 million per year.

Mann called it a journey "that's not done yet, but we're almost there."