
TIGER hunt, Take 2: Port of Brownsville takes another crack at federal funding previously denied

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Port of Brownsville officials went hunting for TIGER I late last year but came up empty-handed, so they're hoping TIGER II is easier to catch.

The port's new designation as a member of the federal America's Marine Highway program is no guarantee of success, but it can't hurt.

TIGER stands for DOT's Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery program. It's part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, otherwise known as the stimulus act. Earlier this year the port applied for \$73.5 million in TIGER funds — \$1.5 billion of which were available for the whole country — to pay for massive dock upgrades in order to enhance its "short-sea" container-on-barge shipping service with Port Manatee, Fla.

Despite spending \$3 million on consultants and putting together what port officials felt confident was a watertight application, Brownsville was passed over by TIGER. Port officials have picked themselves up off the floor and are on the hunt again — this time with a scaled-down request contained in a joint bid with Port Manatee. The TIGER II application will use parts of the old TIGER I application, which the Port of Brownsville submitted on its own.

“We’re going to go after every opportunity there is for money,” said port director Eduardo Campirano, director of the Port of Brownsville. “This is the next opportunity.”

While TIGER I projects were fully funded by the feds, TIGER II awards require a 20 percent match. Campirano said the application this time around will be for \$31 million — \$25 million from the feds and \$6 million in matching funds from the port. The port has already pre-applied for the grant. Final applications are due by Aug. 23 and awards should be announced this fall, said port spokesman Manuel Ortiz.

The port is soliciting letters of support from port-based businesses and South Texas [state](#) and federal political leaders to accompany the application. Campirano thinks the port may stand a better chance this time with the new, scaled-down application.

“Given what we saw with the last round of grants, where the average award was around \$33 million and there was more money — this time there’s only \$600 million available for TIGER II compared to \$1.5 billion for TIGER I — I think to realistically hope to be able to fare more favorably, we have to look at a lesser amount,” he said.

The TIGER II funds would go to a scaled-down upgrade of Dock 16 compared to the one planned under TIGER I. The proposed upgrade would give the port the cargo capacity necessary to add more frequent short-sea container service between Brownsville and Port Manatee.

“If we get that grant and improved infrastructure, then we have a much greater chance of increasing business from the standpoint of adding a second tug, shortening the time it takes to offer services,” Campirano said. “Ideally the long-term plan is to go to twice-a-week service. Now it’s once every 10 days.”

Dubbing the cross-gulf route “M-10,” port officials had applied with the U.S. Maritime Administration for inclusion in the four-month-old America’s Marine Highway program, aimed at moving more cargo on the U.S. waterways to help ease highway congestion. It paid off: Department of Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood announced on Wednesday that the Brownsville-Port Manatee route was among eight waterborne cargo projects across the country receiving official Marine Highway designation.

The designation means the Port of Brownsville will be able to compete for Marine Highway Funds — including \$7 million available now — to build up its short-sea operation and expand business opportunities.

“I can only speculate that the Marine Highway designation will help us in pursuing TIGER II funds rather than hurt us,” Campirano said. “Unfortunately, it does not guarantee that we will receive favorable consideration of our joint application with Port Manatee. This is still good for us.”

Steve Tyndal, Port Manatee’s senior director of trade development and special projects, said applying for TIGER II funds is a “keystone moment” for Brownsville and Port Manatee.

“If we succeed in earning the grant it’s likely that the net result for each community will be the creation of [jobs](#), and the enhancement of the maritime community in both regions,” he said.

Tyndal said maritime jobs are desirable because they pay well, while short-sea shipping is a more environmentally sustainable alternative to surface transportation via 18-wheeler. M-10, specifically, has the potential to ease traffic

on the southeastern stretch of Interstate 10, which suffers from heavy congestion — much of it tractor-trailer traffic. Above all, more short-sea shipping would be an economic boost to both ports, Tyndal said.

“I know that both communities, Brownsville and Manatee, are suffering greatly from the effects of the recession in terms of unemployment and economic stress,” he said. “This to me seems to be a reasonable and a long-term way of providing the two communities ways to enhance the assets that they have to create better and more higher paying jobs.”