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Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Port Authority seeks \$26.5 million from Ohio to improve current site

Wind turbine maker a prospective tenant

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Tom Breckenridge

Plain Dealer Reporter

Cleveland's port is seeking a \$26.5 million makeover of its docks and warehouses, driven by the prospect of a wind turbine manufacturing plant opening on port land.

M. Torres Group, based in Pamplona, Spain, could generate up to 200 jobs over three years, partly to crank out wind turbines for the county's proposed pilot project on Lake Erie, according to the application for state money by the Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Port Authority.

Over 10 years, the company could employ up to 3,000 if it successfully taps the nation's growing market for wind turbines, the application shows.

M. Torres, which does little business in the United States, would eventually fill the port's largest warehouse, a 144,000-square-foot facility that can handle rail cars.

That would strain the port's ability to handle current operations and attract new business, the port says.

So it's applying for state and federal job-stimulus money to improve the port. Proposed changes include building a new warehouse and filling in one of the port's three slips.

The port is pitching the investment, even as it proposes to relocate its operations, west of Cleveland Browns Stadium, to a site north of East 55th Street.

Currently, the port plans a phased move that would start in the early to mid-2020s and finish in the late 2030s, Wasserman said Friday.

"The underlying objective while we're still there is to have the busiest port we can to have maximum effect on the regional economy," Wasserman said.

City and county officials appear to favor the \$26.5 million in improvements at the current site.

In a news release from the port, Mayor Frank Jackson said careful planning by the port will spark job growth.

Encouraging investment is key to a "community where people are not exactly knocking doors down to get into," Cuyahoga County Commissioner Tim Hagan said in an interview.

The port's effort meshes with the county's request last month for \$28 million in federal stimulus money for the wind turbine project on Lake Erie, said county development Director Paul Oyaski.

That would be half of an estimated \$56 million needed to erect six to eight wind turbines on Lake Erie, connect them to the region's electric grid and establish an offshore wind research and testing center, county officials said.

M. Torres is apparently considering a major investment in the project. Gov. Ted Strickland first named the company as having an interest in Ohio in December.

The state's Development Department leads negotiations with M. Torres, which so far has declined to comment.

The port would need \$1 million to outfit its largest warehouse if M. Torres decides to come, according to the port's application for state funding.

Other improvements under the \$26.5 million plan include:

\$10.2 million to build a manufacturing warehouse. The 100,000-square-foot building would sit southwest of the port's western slip.

\$2.2 million to fill in the port's eastern slip, which is owned by the city. The work would create 3.5 acres of new land and allow a new, 1,583-foot berth for Great Lakes ships.

\$10 million to expand a warehouse. It sits just west of the slip that would be filled in.

\$2.2 million to buy a mobile crane. The Manitowoc crane could lift up to 200 tons, and it would replace the "Buckeye Booster."

The 150-ton crane underwent \$454,000 in repairs in 2001. But port officials say the stationary, 45-year-old crane is no longer useful.

The port applied for \$13 million under the state's \$1.57 billion job-stimulus plan. The port will apply soon for \$13.5 million from the Economic Development Administration, part of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

The improvements would bolster the port's ability to handle more shipping. Wasserman and his staff have an ambitious plan to capture more business through international and Canadian ports, though some are skeptical such business is available.

Those opposed to the port's big move hope the investment signals the port will stay where it's at.

The port's proposed relocation to East 55th will cost hundreds of millions of dollars and displace a marina, fishing pier and parkland.

The port says it wants to replace and enhance lakeside amenities, but opponents say the costly move will take much longer than the port estimates.

"This makes sense for the port and for taxpayers, to make the best use of the current location," said lawyer Bill Gruber, one of the leading opponents. "It's better than destroying a park along our lakefront."

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:

tbreckenridge@plaiind.com, 216-999-4695

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