

## **Port Connector Panel at the 2020 Deep South ITE Winter Meeting**

The Deep South Section of the Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE) hosted its Winter 2020 meeting at the Mississippi Department of Transportation (MDOT) Headquarters in Hattiesburg on January 30, 2020. Mississippi Defense Initiative's (MDI) Andy Kilgore moderated a panel that discussed the Canal Road/Port Connector Road project in Gulfport. The panel brought together representatives from the Port of Gulfport, city of Gulfport, local and regional military base commanders, Gulf Regional Planning Commission, and MDOT.

The panel discussion was opened by Jonathan Daniels, CEO and Executive Director of the Mississippi State Port Authority at Gulfport, who talked about growth of the Port and how this growth drives the need for the Port Connector Road. He discussed the recent designation of the Port as the 17<sup>th</sup> Strategic Port in the U.S. and the military traffic that this will bring to the Port. In addition to the military traffic, the Port of Gulfport continues to grow in terms of civilian/commercial traffic as well. This increase in traffic to and from the Port continues to add to the city of Gulfport's traffic flow problems. The port connector road, in the simplest explanation, is needed to route Port traffic to away from the downtown Gulfport area. This need has only grown over time.

Jeff Ely from MDOT followed with a short history of the project from MDOT's perspective and a snapshot of where the project currently stands. The project dates back to 1994. MDOT is responsible for the northern portion of the project, from the I10 interchange to 28<sup>th</sup> Avenue, to include where the road will cross the Turkey Creek watershed. Currently a right-of-way exists, and MDOT is currently conducting the environmental re-evaluation for the project.

Jonathan Kiser from Neel Schaffer followed and represented the city of Gulfport. The City of Gulfport's portion of the project is the Highway 90 interchange, north to 28<sup>th</sup> Avenue where it meets MDOT's responsibility. Kiser discussed design considerations to include the raised road (overpass) over Highway 90.

Once the panel discussed the port connector road placement and specifics, CAPT Whitmire, Commanding Officer of the Naval Construction Battalion Center (NCBC) Gulfport, discussed how the project would enhance the mission to deploy Navy Seabee construction assets from NCBC Gulfport. He showed pictures of Canal Road and explained why it would be unusable as a deployment route to the coast because of its extremely limited width. He also discussed improved access to the Seabee Base and how the project would improve general base operations.

COL Ginn, Commanding Officer of Camp Shelby Joint Forces Training Center, echoed the need for an improved deployment route that bypassed the downtown area of Gulfport. He discussed the recent exercise (ARTIC ANVIL) that brought the 4<sup>th</sup> BDE of the 25<sup>th</sup> ID to Camp Shelby and how 1,500+ pieces of military equipment were road marched from the Ports of Pascagoula and Gulfport north to Camp Shelby.

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The panel discussion was completed by Paul Gavin, Executive Director of the Gulf Regional Planning Commission (GRPC). He explained GRPC's roll in transportation planning and how it affected this project. Gavin followed that with a short discussion of how to fund the project with a combination of federal, state and local dollars. The discussion brought out the fact that the military may be able to assist in the funding because this project has a direct effect on units deploying from nearby military bases and from the southeastern U.S.

Overall the panel discussion was extremely informative for the participants of the 2020 Deep South ITE Winter Meeting. Hopefully this discussion will lead to renewed efforts to fund and complete the Canal Road/Port Connector Road project in Gulfport.