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FEATURED

New maritime office to open in Paducah

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U.S. Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao speaks to a crowd at the Carson Center in Paducah on Thursday, announcing the U.S. Maritime Administration will establish a new Gateway Office here.

ELLEN O'NAN | The Sun

Representatives of local, state and federal government came together with members of Paducah's marine and transport industries as U.S. Secretary of Transportation Elaine Chao announced Thursday the opening of a new Gateway Office in the city.

"Paducah has always been a natural hub for regional inland waterway traffic because of its special location, situated between the Tennessee, Ohio, Cumberland and Mississippi rivers," Chao said at the Luther F. Carson Four Rivers Center.

"It's been Kentucky's crown jewel in terms of maritime importance," the secretary continued. "Paducah has become the headquarters to important barge line companies and home to more U.S.-flag inland waterway operators than anywhere else in the nation."

Chao also praised Paducah as a "center for maritime training," highlighting the presence of West Kentucky Community & Technical College's Inland Logistics and Marine Institute as well as the Seamen's Church Institute.

Maritime Administrator Rear Admiral Mark H. Buzby, the head of Maritime Administration (MARAD), an agency within the U.S. Department of Transportation, spoke before introducing Chao.

Buzby complimented Paducah, calling the city a model when it came to the local government's collaboration with the maritime industry. He also talked about the industry's future.

"As a nation we have no alternative but to develop, grow and modernize our ports and inland waterway systems," said Buzby. "The tug and barge industry will be challenged to carry an even larger part of the national freight load in the coming years. It's the last load that has capacity left."

Earlier in the program, Matt Ricketts, executive vice president of the Crouse Corporation, spoke on behalf of the industry. "Our marine transportation system, although sometimes out of sight or out of mind, generates economic activity for the country and helps to sustain more than half a million jobs," Ricketts said. "Reliable, efficient infrastructure is the foundation of our country. It's also the future."

Gateway offices help facilitate the Maritime Administration "promote collaboration among federal, state, local and private partners on challenges facing the marine transportation system in their areas of responsibility, focusing particularly on planning and environmental issues," according to the MARAD's website.

"With the level of maritime activity," Chao said, "it makes sense to place a Maritime Administration Gateway Office in Paducah. Different cities were evaluated based on their location, maritime communities, cost of living, access to industry and other factors. I think you should be proud to say Paducah won the competition fair and square."

Chao also announced that Chad Dorsey would serve as the director for the new office.

"Think of Dorsey as your personal direct line to the Maritime Administration," Chao said.

Dorsey and his family have been residents of Paducah for several years. He, his wife Elizabeth, their three sons and his parents were in attendance.

The location for Paducah's Gateway Office, slated to be the 10th in the country, is still being determined. Dorsey is expected to begin work immediately. The office will be responsible for a 22-state region, connecting many of the nation's navigable rivers.

"The office will expand MARAD's communication with maritime stakeholders, and it will support our nation's inland ports, including those that are more rurally located," said Chao.

In addition to the announcement of the Gateway Office, Chao cited two grants that would benefit the Paducah-area river industry: a \$251,927 Marine Highway grant for the Paducah-McCracken County Riverport to pursue container-on-barge service and a \$1.125 million Small Shipyard grant for the Walker Boat Yard to support the purchase of a 180-ton Crawler Crane.

"Paducah has always been an important port on the inland waterway system," said Chao. "With investments like the Gateway Office, Marine Highway grants and Small Shipyard grants, it will remain an important inland waterway port in the future."