

Here's the next steps after Tampa Bay's political and transportation leaders rally in support of Jones Act shipping

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A range of business and transportation leaders came together at the Gulf Marine Shipyard Friday to kick off the Florida Maritime Partnership, a group advocating for the state's domestic maritime industry.

Backdropped by a Crowley Maritime Corp. ship carrying cars, container and fuel to Puerto Rico, politicians from across the state touted the number of jobs created by domestic shipping — transporting goods between U.S. ports.

Those trade lanes are governed by the Jones Act, a century-old law that requires domestic shipping to be done by ships that are built, owned and operated by U.S. companies and personnel.

The U.S. Senate is considering a bill that would exempt Puerto Rico from the Jones act, with supporters saying the higher cost of building ships in the U.S. and operating U.S.-flagged vessels amounts to a tax on the island's residents. The governor of Puerto Rico has asked for a 10 year exemption from the law, and both the libertarian Cato Institute and President Barack Obama's communication director for Hispanic media have pushed for the exemption.

On Friday, though, supporters of the law focused on the jobs it creates here.

“The domestic maritime industry in Tampa is important not just for the stable and well-paying jobs it provides to Tampanians, but also the critical role it plays in our local, state and national economy,” said Tampa Mayor Bob Buckhorn. “With nearly 10,000 jobs and over \$2 billion in economic impact in the Tampa region, and over 65,000 jobs and a \$14.6 billion in economic impact across the state, the domestic maritime industry is vital in keeping Tampa and Florida a leader in the industry. When our local shipbuilders and maritime workers are able to thrive, the entire city, state, and country benefits.”

The law is important for national security, said Seafarers International Union Vice President Dean Corgey, telling a story from his grandfather about U.S. merchant mariners keeping his Navy ship fueled in World War II.

“We have a merchant marine because of the Jones Act,” he said. “God bless America, God bless my grandfather, and God bless the Jones Act.”

One key aspect of the fight is the lack of U.S.-built tanker ships to carry liquified natural gas to the island, which opponents say is continuing to hurt the island, which is still recovering after Hurricane María.

But the market stands ready to meet that need, Crowley Senior Vice President Michael Roberts said.

“If demand increases, we will build ships,” he said. “Right now, the market doesn’t exit.”

Members of the new group will be going to Tallahassee next week to lobby for state support of the act.