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Huge containership calls at Baltimore's port

Giant vessel expected to be just average this time next year

By Michael Dresser, The Baltimore Sun

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The port of Baltimore has played host to some massive containerships in its time, but none larger than the MSC Sindy, which paid a call Monday at the Seagirt Marine Terminal.

More than 3 1/2 football fields long and capable of hauling 9,200 20-foot containers, the Panamanian-flag Sindy unloaded more than 900 containers and took on more than 500 during her brief stop in Baltimore between calls in New York and Norfolk.

By this time next year, however, the Sindy could be no more than an average-size containership coming to call on Baltimore. With a 50-foot-deep berth scheduled to open next August, the port can expect to receive visits from containerships half again as large as the Sindy.

The Mediterranean Shipping Co.'s Sindy was a massive presence at the Seagirt docks, where multiple cranes and swarms of trucks tended to her cargo under a bright blue sky. Bright red, yellow and blue containers were stacked 18 rows across and at least seven layers high at her stern, and shipping line officials said she was taking up every bit of the 45 feet of water at her berth.

Mauro Dal Bo, district manager for Mediterranean, said the Asia-bound Sindy was actually the second ship of its class to call on Baltimore. The Sindy's sister ship, the MSC Bruxelles, stopped here two weeks ago on a trial run that the company kept under wraps until it had departed.

The size of containerships is reckoned in "twenty-foot equivalent units," or TEUs, one of which is the size of a 20-foot container. Many containers are 40 feet long, and count as two TEUs.

The Sindy and Bruxelles easily eclipsed the size of the previous record-holders in the port, which carried 8,400 TEUs. But the larger containerships that are expected to call here regularly once the 50-foot berth opens carry about 14,000 TEUs, Dal Bo said.

That berth is being built by Ports America, which has formed a public-private partnership with the Maryland Port Administration, just a few hundred feet to the east of where the Sindy was tied up Monday. The new berth, and the long-reaching cranes being installed to load and unload the ships that use it, are expected to accommodate the larger vessels that will use the Panama Canal when a widening project is completed in 2014.

The Sindy's arrival was hailed by Helen Delich Bentley, the former Maryland congresswoman and maritime industry advocate for whom the port of Baltimore is named. Bentley said the arrival of ships as large as the Sindy shows the importance of the 50-foot-deep channel that is one of the port's selling points.

Bentley said she was miffed recently to hear Virginia Transportation Secretary Sean Connaughton boast that the port of Norfolk was the only East Coast port with a 50-foot-shipping channel. She said that during her congressional career, she successfully pushed to have the channel dredged to a depth of 50 feet — a project that was completed in 1989.

"When I challenged him, he said we don't consider Baltimore to be on the East Coast, that's up the Chesapeake Bay," she said.

While most of the maritime industry considers Baltimore an East Coast port, Bentley said it was important to counter the suggestion that it's not. "Sometimes perception creates problems you don't want," she said.

Joe Harris, a spokesman for the port of Virginia, suggested the secretary might have been joking about Baltimore's position on the East Coast.

Joke or not, Norfolk gets a lot of mileage out of its 50-foot claim.

An Associated Press article from early this year reported that Norfolk was the only East Coast seaport with a 50-foot depth. And Virginia port officials haven't been shy about reinforcing that claim.

"We're the only U.S. East Coast port with 50 feet of water, and as these vessels get bigger and bigger, that channel depth is going to grow in its importance," Jerry A. Bridges, the Virginia Port Authority's executive director, said in a statement on the Port Authority's web site.

It is true that Baltimore, until the new Seagirt berth is completed, will not be able to accommodate container ships that need 50 feet of depth. But Bentley said coal, gypsum and ore ships with that deep a draft routinely call on Baltimore.

New York's port authority is also dredging its shipping channel to 50 feet, but it faces a problem accommodating the largest ships because the Bayonne Bridge between Staten Island and New Jersey is not high enough for them to clear it. Raising that bridge is expected to cost at least \$1 billion and to take several years.

The ability to handle large, "post-Panamax" ships — so-called because they won't be able to use the Panama Canal until the widening is complete — is expected to become increasingly important in the maritime business because of the lower cost of shipping in the larger vessels.

Mediterranean has been bringing larger ships to Baltimore and other ports as it has expanded its service to Asia, company officials said.

Marco DiCasagrande, Mediterranean's operations manager in Baltimore, said that as soon as the 50-foot-berth opens, the ocean-going behemoths that now can't be unloaded here will begin to call.

"They'll be here as soon as the port can handle them," he said.