

Frank Hamons, MD port official who navigated stormy issues, retires

Hamons leaves a legacy of successfully engaging the community in potentially contentious issues.

- [Rona Kobell](#) November 29, 2013



Hamons, 71, is retiring after 34 years with the port. He's joining Gahagan and Associates, which specializes in dredging. (Dave Harp)

The son of a baseball scout, Frank Hamons moved dozens of times before graduating from college. Always the new kid at school, he learned quickly how to make friends so he could survive the next few months. He learned to take in the mood of a lunch table, lose the accent from wherever he lived last and defuse hostile situations.

Those lessons prepared the future deputy director of harbor development at the Maryland Port Administration well for his first days on the job in 1980. He walked into a battle over placing dredge material at Baltimore County's Hart-Miller Island that was so contentious it went all the way to the Supreme Court. Always being the new kid also armed him well for the fights to come, from little skirmishes about the port's projects to the all-out war on the disposal of dredge material in the open waters of the Chesapeake in the 1990s.

Hamons, 71, is retiring after 34 years with the port. But he won't be going far. He's joining a private firm, Gahagan and Associates, which specializes in dredging and is based just north of Baltimore.

For a man who as a child never stayed in any place very long, the port became home. Hamons, say people who worked with him, changed the perception of both the port administration and the material formerly called "dredge spoil." Once looked at as a hazardous waste, dredged sediment is now seen as a resource and communities are begging for the material to use it as a bulwark against erosion and rising seas. And the port, which supplies 14,600 direct jobs and generates

\$3.5 billion in economic impact, is now seen as a government agency that listens to its constituents and will contribute its vast proceeds to help improve their lives.

“In many ways, Frank has set an example for how other state agencies can get things done,” said Frances Flanigan, who has been consulting for the port for more than a decade and worked closely with Hamons on several projects. “His work has enabled the port to build trust, which in many ways didn’t exist before and in many ways still doesn’t exist between government and citizens.”

For his part, Hamons tries to keep perspective on Baltimore’s role in the wider world, both by combing through the history books on the War of 1812 and by studying the enormous map of the world in his office. The port, he told some Russian visitors, is where American fighters stopped the British. The Russians said that made it a “hero port,” and Hamons said he liked that phrase.

“I’ve always felt like I was working in a place that was an important part of U.S. history,” he said. “It was just another little incentive to do it right.”

Unlike in high school, when he walked into a new cafeteria not knowing a soul, Hamons knew the layout in Hart-Miller, the first dredge island built by the Port of Baltimore. He had reviewed and approved the project while with the Department of Natural Resources, where he headed the planning and technical analysis division. At that time, the port had not been dredged for five years — in large part because the agency could not find suitable places to stockpile the sediment.

Hart-Miller, an island near Sparrows Point in Eastern Baltimore County, was ideal for disposing dredge material. But residents railed against it. Part of their concern, Hamons said, was they felt their area had become a dumping ground for industry. But more importantly, said Dundalk activist Tom Kroen, was “the fear of what might happen.”

Toxins were a back-burner worry. Kroen said the community, fresh from Tropical Storm Agnes, was worried about hurricanes, flooding and destruction. But as the hole the port had dug filled, and Kroen read more about the project and pored through the scientific studies, he became a convert. Hamons, he said, was an excellent minister.

“Every time we needed someone to come in and explain what was going on, Frank was there,” Kroen said. “At the very beginning, some of the members were vitriolic in their attitude toward Frank. He was called names I wouldn’t call my worst enemy. He stood there — he wasn’t angry or bitter — he took it, and went on from there.”

Hart-Miller was a success, though the fight against it didn't die down. Opponents took the case all the way to the Supreme Court, which declined to hear it. Hamons said the residents and the port eventually reached a *détente* — he knew the fight was over when a longtime opponent called to complain about an aspect of construction and called it “our dyke.” The whole episode taught him that community involvement is essential from the beginning.

Just as the Hart-Miller battle ended, another loomed: the war over Kent Island Deep, better known as Site 104. This four-mile stretch of deep water near the Bay Bridge was going to be used to place dredge from the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal.

Then-Gov. Parris N. Glendening, a committed environmentalist, supported the plan, and scientists from the University of Maryland determined that open-water dumping of dredge material wouldn't harm aquatic life in that site. But local activists, among them soon-to-be state Sen. E. J. Pipkin, railed against the site, saying it would cause unknown damage to the Chesapeake. Eventually, the port dropped plans for open dumping, and the Maryland legislature passed a law prohibiting the practice.

Hamons still believes that open-water placement of dredge material can be done safely. But if Hart-Miller taught him to engage citizens early, then Site 104 taught him that perception often is reality.

Poplar Island helped prove both, too. Residents of the Eastern Shore were largely on board with the construction, which will restore a remnant island that had burst into three parts to its original size of 1,100 acres. Plans also call for more than 575 acres to be added, making the site about a third larger than Hart-Miller. The project, which will be finished in 30 years, will cost more than \$1 billion.

Residents and Port employees were happy about the opportunity to marry two goals - restoring a Chesapeake island while at the same time helping nearby communities fight erosion. But even the engineers involved in the construction were surprised at what a success the site became — a wonderful home for herons, mummichugs, loons and turtles.

Poplar changed perception of dredge material from something people feared to something they wanted to use to protect communities in danger of losing the constant battle with erosion. That covers just about every island in the Chesapeake, and some of the peninsulas, too.

When the port needed another site for dredge material in 2003, Hamons worked closely with Flanigan to engage citizens early and educate them about what was really in the dredge material. The group worked together to choose Masonville Cove, a 54-acre former waste dump site, as a new place to put port dredge material. The plans called for Masonville to open as a wildlife

refuge with access to the water and programs for schoolchildren and community members about the critters of the Chesapeake.

The port has invested \$22 million in Masonville, transforming the property from an unsightly dump into a beautiful waterfront refuge. Recently, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service designated Masonville as one of its first urban refuges in the country.

Hamons said the opening of Masonville was the most satisfying project of his career. It also leaves big shoes for his successor, David Blazer of the Maryland Coastal Bay Program, to fill.

“What Frank and his team have done is created a blueprint to follow,” said Richard Scher, the port’s communications director. “The port was doing the science, they were doing other aspects, but they were omitting a large part, which was the community. Through Hart-Miller, Poplar and Masonville, what he’s done, his model, it’s stood the test of time.”