

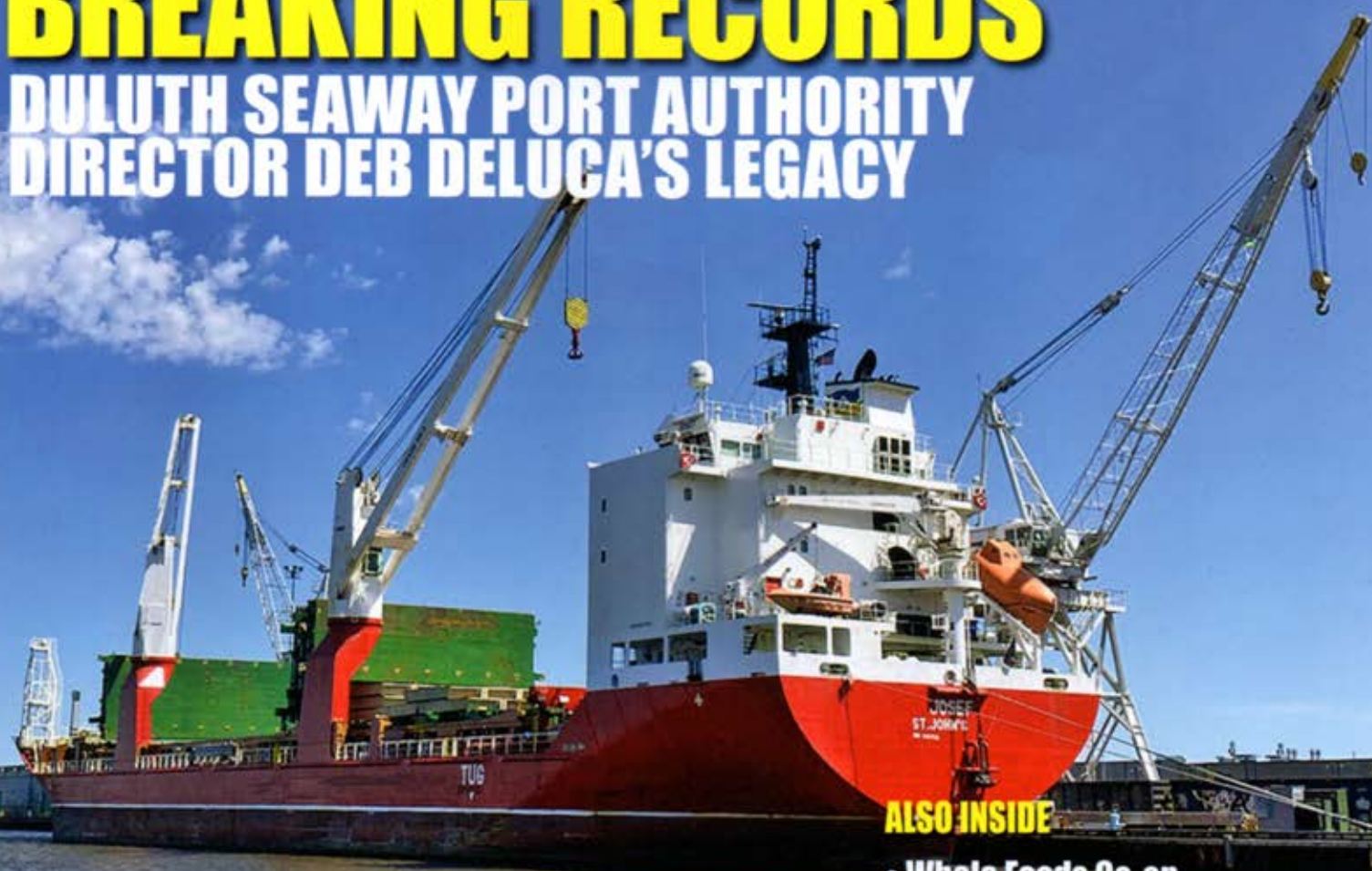
# Duluthian

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## SETTING GOALS, BREAKING RECORDS

DULUTH SEAWAY PORT AUTHORITY  
DIRECTOR DEB DELUCA'S LEGACY



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# SETTING GOALS AND BREAKING RECORDS

## PORT DIRECTOR DEB DELUCA TO RETIRE AFTER 10 YEARS OF MILESTONE ACHIEVEMENTS

**I**n 2024 the Port of Duluth increased the amount of cargo it moved through for the third consecutive year. Fifty-six years into the Seaway era, the port is still setting goals and breaking records. If there is any question as to how the port is doing, you can be assured, it's doing well. That said, there has been a lot of change in the last 10 years. If you haven't paid close attention, well, you've missed a lot.

The most recent news is the announced retirement date for Executive Director Deb DeLuca from her leadership role at the Duluth Seaway Port Authority (DSPA). As she eyes retirement, DeLuca, the first female to oversee the port, looks at her milestone achievements and her plans for retirement.

Her rise to the top came rather quickly. DeLuca first came to the Port Authority in 2014 when she was brought on board as director of government and environmental affairs.

"One of the reasons I was hired into the position was because of my demonstrated record of securing funds. I am very proud that, starting under Vanta (former Port Director Vanta Coda) and continuing with me, we really ramped up investing in our facility. The investment is necessary to be able to grow business through the facility, to be able to provide the services that our region needs," said DeLuca from her office in the Seaway

Building overlooking the Duluth waterfront. "We've put over \$50 million into the assets in that time frame, since 2015," (\$35 million during DeLuca's time with the Port Authority).

A small portion of the money went into the renovation of a century-old schoolhouse on Rice's Point into the Port Authority's new office, a major achievement for DeLuca. The \$3.1 million project began in 2018, aided by a \$2.37 million grant from the state transportation department's Minnesota Port Development Assistance Program.

Two years later, then wearing a COVID mask, DeLuca deftly handled a giant pair of scissors as she cut the ribbon for the new office.

"I think about this as the future Port Authority office – not just for now, but something that's going to be a legacy for many years to come," she said during the open house celebration. The Duluth Seaway Port Authority occupies the second floor of the 13,000 square-foot building, known most recently as the Seaway Building.

DeLuca initiated the development of a strategic plan for the Port Authority, which included a revised DSPA personnel handbook, procurement/contracting policies and an updated set of operating objectives, practices and guidelines. COVID hit during the new strategic planning sessions, slowing the progress, but DeLuca led her team, meeting remotely for many of the sessions until a consensus was reached.









"The biggest lesson was that through an intensive, analytical strategic-planning process, the general direction of our work was affirmed," recalled DeLuca. "This gave us even greater momentum and conviction around the structure and intent of our work as the Duluth Seaway Port Authority team."

As a whole, the port is a micro-community of maritime-related businesses, organizations, trade groups and governmental agencies. You need to speak the many languages, something DeLuca admits she's gotten good at

on permitting and getting facilities permitted. Sometimes it's just a really long process."

Looking back on her past 10 years, DeLuca is certain of one thing.

"This job has been the highlight of my career. I love this job. I love working with the people on my team. It's an excellent team, and we work together really well, and the partnerships we have and we've worked hard to grow and establish are important to me," she said.

Asked about her decision to leave, DeLuca is going for all the right reasons.

using multi-modal means of transportation.

"On the port side, you have to have terminals that move the goods that are important to your regional economy," DeLuca said in an overview of the port. "I'd like to give a call out to our private sector partners. They've been investing in their terminals. There's been shipping through this port since late 1800s. Of the 21 terminals in the harbor, 20 of them are owned by private entities. We don't know about all the projects that have gone on, but we know of \$50 million in investment that's gone on at a number of private terminals over the past few years."

Outside of our port, in the broader context of the Great Lakes/St. Lawrence Seaway, all the ports and ancillary businesses have a collective role to play in the overall vitality in commerce across the system.

"It takes that willingness to maintain the infrastructure, but also dig in and do the work of, how can we build the trade? How can we build the cargo flows through our port. We're part of a larger system," explained DeLuca. "For a Great Lakes port to be successful, you need to network successfully with the Great Lakes and the Seaway System, and the Canadians, because the more ships that are coming into the system, the more vessels carrying general cargo, carrying containers or moving grain out, the bigger the opportunity for your port to be successful."

***"I still have three months of work left and I am fully engaged at getting through a big to-do list with my team. I am thinking of retirement as a 'next season' of life."***

- DEB DELUCA, DIRECTOR - DULUTH SEAWAY PORT AUTHORITY

"I like to say that I do speak 'bureaucratese,'" she said. "In order to get through a lot of those processes you need to be able to be patient and listen, but then you also need to be able to make your case and then be persistent, following through on it. So, whether it's working with Customs and Border Protection to get the facility built to support containers' movement through our terminal, whether it's working with the Coast Guard to emphasize the importance of ice breaking assets and having them here in the port, whether it's working with the Corps of Engineers

"I still have three months of work left and I am fully engaged at getting through a big to-do list with my team. I am thinking of retirement as a 'next season' of life. I am looking forward to more time for reading, travel, being outdoors, spending time with family. I do want to stay connected to our community, but would like to take some time to figure out what that means."

## THE HEALTH OF THE PORT

Having a port in our community is a great asset. It provides multiple economic opportunities through the movement of freight,



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY DSPA







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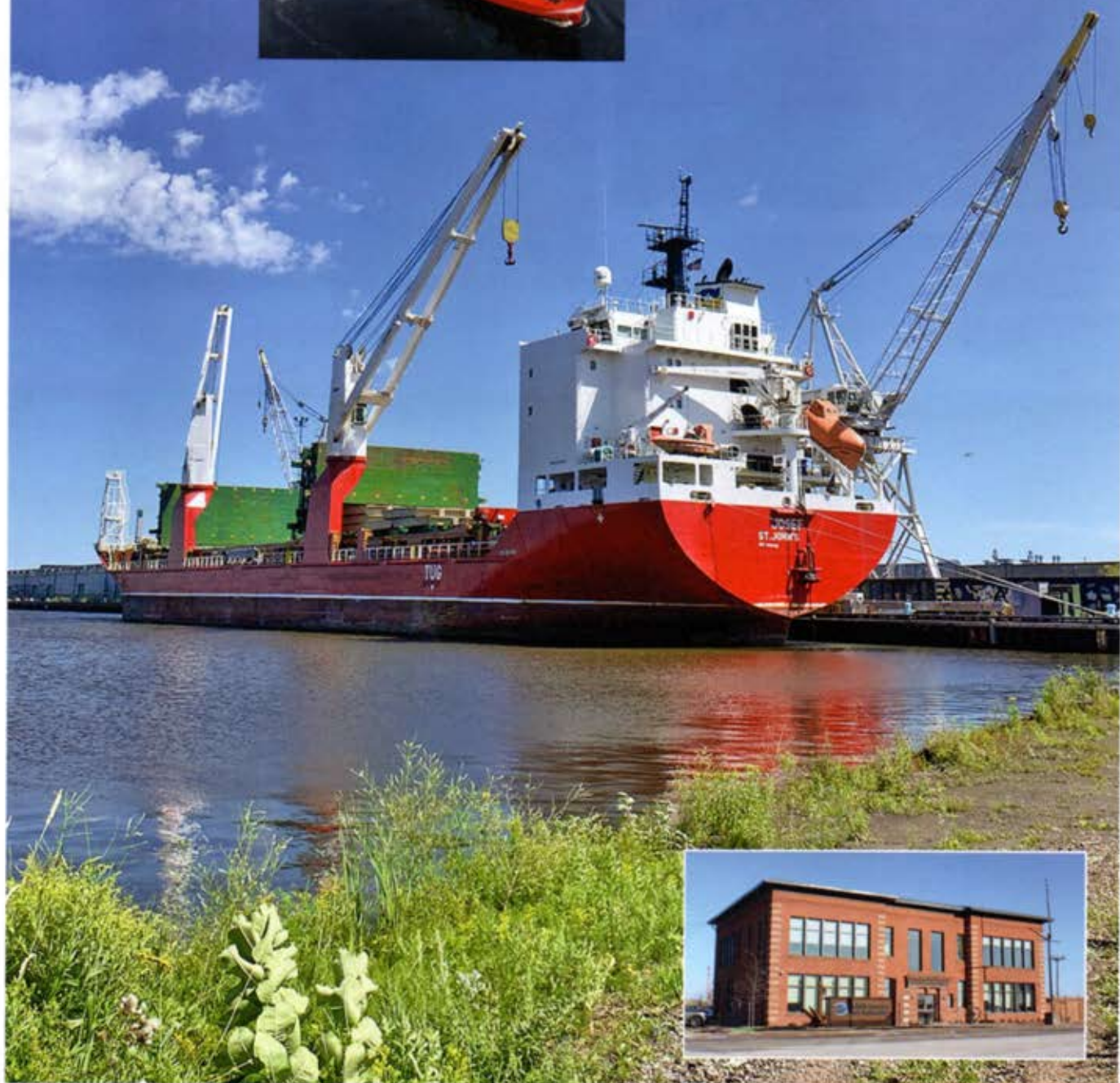


PHOTO BY STEVE ISOLA





DeLuca still speaks with passion about the role of the Port Authority.

"I think it's wonderful that the community supports the port, that they understand the importance of the port to the region and are supportive of the port, ideally, as part of their identity. I feel that that's true here in the Twin Ports," said the executive director.

## DULUTH CARGO CONNECT

Duluth Cargo Connect moves freight through the Port of Duluth as a cooperative marketing/branding effort between the Duluth Seaway Port Authority and their stevedoring partner Lake Superior Warehousing. Lake Superior Warehousing has been the cargo handling partner since 1991.

The Duluth Cargo Connect brand presents a united front for marketing the cargo handling and storage capabilities of the Port of Duluth. Numbers for the 2024 season show freight tonnage (including sea, road and rail) above 500,000 tons, approximately 21 percent more than last year and the highest total since 2020.



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY DSPA





2023 marked the start of a new monthly ConRo liner service between Duluth and Antwerp, Belgium. Advertised by the Dutch shipping company Spliethoff Group as "the first and only liner service between Europe and the Great lakes" the Spliethoff vessels now provide regular trans-Atlantic service to the port. Last year, Spliethoff expanded the service to include ports on the Mediterranean.

As vessel congestion grows at ports on both coasts, the Great Lakes continue to be an alternative to moving product halfway into the North American continent via the cheapest, most efficient means of moving bulk cargo, the Seaway.

Duluth Cargo Connect continues to pursue cargo while the Port Authority moves ahead with raising capital for their next initiatives, including the development of a recently acquired property along Rice's Point.

In December 2019, the Port Authority purchased the Duluth Lake Port grain elevator. The former International Multifoods/Capitol Elevator system is "dilapidated and outmoded," the dock wall under the middle third of the facility undermined, explained DeLuca. "We're demolishing that facility, and then we will be rebuilding the

dock walls and the deck. That will take some time, but our objective is to, again, provide the services that we need to support the regional economy, whatever direction that takes us in. So, that's our next-term capital project."

Just as the port is iconic to the city of Duluth, iconic to the DSPA are its 1960s era Whirley 90-ton gantry cranes. Symbolic of the port's entry into the international world of the seaway, they're still functional but their age will be their downfall.

"It's like getting parts for your 1959 sedan," DeLuca said.

A potential investment will be the addition of mobile harbor cranes.

"We do a lot of unloading on Berth's 8 and 9 across the slip. It is our plan to augment those with electric mobile harbor cranes or hybrid mobile harbor cranes. They're so expensive, we really do need to seek funding to do that," said DeLuca, who explained that replacing the cranes is not an eligible cost under the state for grant funds, which means the Port Authority will need to find an alternative source of funding.

"It's actually a very critical part of our plan, because those mobile harbor cranes can serve the entire port. We have a huge rebuilding

project for those original gantry cranes, painting and updating them. They're so old," laughed DeLuca, "you almost have to do an archeological dig to find the appropriate equipment or parts."

## MARINE GREEN PORT

The co-existence of shipping and a clean environment is important to the Port of Duluth, as well as the Great Lakes economic system. Moving goods by water is the most energy efficient way to do so, especially heavy cargos.

"It removes congestion from our highways, for one thing," notes DeLuca. "When you think the path from here to the East Coast that is bypassed, that very congested stretch of highway around Chicagoland. So, right off the bat, you have an environmental leg up with shipping."

Technical advancements, like the development of alternative marine fuels, are leading an industry wide push toward decarbonization.

"It is the trend in the industry to look for ways to decarbonize, just to set goals for decarbonization. There are cargo owners who specifically seek that, shippers who specifically seek opportunities for a lower carbon footprint supply chain. And, as part of the entire



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY DSPA



Great Lakes, St Lawrence Seaway System, we are looking at, how do you decarbonize?" said DeLuca. "The biggest part of that is on the vessels, and that's outside of our control, but we look at how can we be supportive of the vessels, the carrier lines? What they're going to need, once they pick their interim fuel and their final fuel, are bunkering facilities. Our region may have a very important role

in supplying some of those long-term fuels, and we should be looking for the opportunity to move those fuels through the port."

In 2006, the Duluth Seaway Port Authority became a founding member of an organization called Green Marine. DeLuca currently sits on the executive committee. For those unfamiliar with it, Green Marine is a program of continuous improvement, which started on

the Great Lakes. Participants are held to continuously improve their environmental performance, and they track and report on a number of parameters that expand over time. The objectives get steeper as technology improves and as the best practices get better. There are a number of different categories. As part of their involvement, the DSPA created the port's first Climate Action Plan.

In 2024, Green Marine reported on eight categories – air emissions, community impacts, community relations, dry bulk handling and storage, environmental leadership, underwater noise, waste management, spill prevention and storm-water management.

"You measure those yearly, and every couple of years you have a verifier come in and verify your measurements and your approach, and then you report that out, and it gives you an opportunity to develop and keep on top of best practices and work with other ports," explained DeLuca. "The participants are ports, shipyards, vessel, carriers."

There were a record 56 North American ports that participated in the evaluation process in 2023, with the Duluth Seaway Port Authority ranking number 10 in the United States and number one among Great Lakes ports.

#### 2024 REPORT CARD

Statistics released by the Duluth Seaway Port Authority on January 31, 2025, showed a strong year for





grain, with exports of more than 750,000 short tons, the best season since 2021. Shipments of taconite came in at 19.4 million tons for the 2024 shipping season, down 10.4 percents from the previous year.

As we await the start of a new shipping season, the talk of tariffs dominates the headlines. The impact on the port is uncertain, but regarding Canada and the U.S. specifically, a spokesman for the DSPA said "Duluth-Superior would likely suffer from tariffs imposed by either country. Cargo volumes between our port and Canada total in the millions of tons each year, spread across categories like iron ore, lumber, salt, grain and general cargo. Almost a third of the iron ore that sailed from Duluth-Superior during the 2024 navigation season went to Canada. Our northern neighbor is a major trade partner, and the net economic result of a trade war between Canada and the U.S. would likely be more negative than positive for our port."

Import/export tonnage finished the season nearly 15 percent ahead of last year's pace, driven primarily by a 31% increase in export tonnage. "Spring wheat led the boost in exports, more than tripling the 2023 tonnage total," noted the DSPA press release. If you measure success by the number of ocean-going vessels, a total of 58 called on the port this season, up from the previous year. **D**

Patrick Lapinski is a freelance writer who was born in Superior.