

A new 'Maritime Golden Age' is near

A large contingent of federal officials, including Alabama congressional representatives, will converge on the Barton Riverfront Industrial Park on Friday for the official launching of a multimillion-dollar venture that could bring thousands of jobs to the Shoals and other parts of northwest Alabama.

The March 20 ribbon-cutting ceremony will celebrate the U.S. Navy's decision to build a 2.2 million square foot defense industrial facility at the old FreightCar plant.

The Navy will partner with Hadrian on the project.

U.S. Rep. Robert Aderholt, R-Haleyville, said this week the project will be "truly transformative for the Shoals area" and Hadrian will play a big part in this.

"Hadrian represents the kind of innovative American manufacturing that is critical to rebuilding and strengthening our nation's defense supply chain," said Aderholt.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and Secretary of the Navy John Phelan are both expected to be here for the ribbon cutting.

The beginning

Aderholt said the plant in Barton is "just the beginning" stage of an exciting industrial shift for northwest Alabama and the entire state.

"As current events show, America needs sea power more than ever — Alabama is up to the challenge and we will build a 21st century collaborative campus here that no conventional shipyard or industrial park can rival," Aderholt said. "I'm proud to have secured funding to bring shipbuilding capacity to Alabama's Fourth Congressional District, proving that maritime dominance is not just a coastal priority."

U.S. Sen. Katie Britt, R-Ala., said the plant will unleash "a new Maritime Golden Age."

"We are proud to welcome this investment that will create good-paying jobs, strengthen our warfighter, and support peace through strength," she said in a statement provided to the TimesDaily. "I'm excited for Alabama to play a leading role in achieving this mission to increase our shipbuilding capacity. Alabama's military capabilities are second to none and stand ready to meet our nation's maritime and defense industrial needs."

While national politicians took the stage in announcing the project, nondisclosure agreements kept local economic development officials from commenting on what is certainly one of the most significant industrial developments the Shoals has had in recent years. But local mayors noted with pride the benefits such a facility will mean to their respective cities and towns, and the entire northwest portion of the state.

"Obviously this is great for Cherokee, western Colbert County and the rest of the Shoals. I would expect those jobs to be at or above (median income levels) and raise the standards of living for our area and the rest of the Shoals," said Cherokee Mayor Troy Rutland, whose town is the closest municipality to the Barton plant.

It has potential

Colbert County Commissioner David Isom, whose district includes the Barton area, said the project has potential to be one of the biggest things to ever happen to the Shoals.

“It’ll be a shot in the arm we’ve been needing for awhile,” Isom said. “I hope that brings some more spinoffs here, too. Maybe it’ll help get some infrastructure in because you’re going to have so much demand.”

Tuscumbia Mayor T.W. Billings said he sees this as an opportunity for growth within the city and added tax revenue.

“Tuscumbia and probably everybody along the [U.S.] 72 corridor will be quite excited about it. It’s going to bring thousands of jobs,” Mayor T.W. Billings said.

Muscle Shoals Mayor Billy Hudson said he’s optimistic for what the new facility will bring to the table.

“I think it’ll be a huge boost for all three of the cities on this side of the river,” added Muscle Shoals Mayor Billy Hudson.

Some local leaders have started receiving invitations to the March 20 ribbon-cutting at the Barton plant. It invites them to “Join Hadrian for the opening of Factory 4 in Cherokee, Alabama.”

The event promises to be an instrumental moment for economic development in the Shoals.