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Port security falls short, Senate candidate Warner says

By Kathy Adams

NORFOLK

Despite security improvements made since Sept. 11, the port of Hampton Roads still lacks a comprehensive plan for guarding against terrorist threats and preparing for natural disasters, former Gov. Mark Warner said Monday.

"We still don't have around our ports here that overarching strategy that provides us with the long-term plan on how we are going to protect these enormous assets, how we can detect, deter and disrupt hostile activities," said Warner, a Democrat who is running against former Republican Gov. Jim Gilmore for a seat in the U.S. Senate.

That's why the government, private industry and colleges and universities must partner together to find innovative ways to secure the port, he said.

At a fundraiser for the Commonwealth Homeland Security Foundation, Warner appealed for donations and support for the nonprofit group from about 150 people. The lunch at Old Dominion University's Ted Constant Convocation Center kicked off the foundation's Maritime Port Security campaign to raise \$25 million over the next five years for research and development grants.

The foundation plans to award the campaign's first grant of about \$1.5 million next year, said Del. Scott Lingamfelter, R-Prince William County, president of the foundation. It will go to a team of colleges and universities to study strategies, technologies and best practices for securing the port and responding to potential threats and disasters, he said.

This is particularly important for the port of Hampton Roads, which accounts for 345,000 jobs, \$41 billion in business revenue and \$1.2 billion in tax revenue each year, according to an economic impact study commissioned by the Virginia Port Authority.

Although it's a difficult time to seek donations because of the weak economy, Lingamfelter said the long-term investment is worth the cost.

"When we come out of the downturn, then you see we're in a place to really exploit the opportunity and begin to apply the solutions that we committed to even when the

economy was tough," he said.

One of the primary focuses has to be following Hong Kong's example of screening 100 percent of cargo containers that move through the port without disrupting the flow of commerce, Warner said.

Lingamfelter said steps such as container screening can't be accomplished by government alone, especially because of budget limits and because private industry controls about 80 percent of port infrastructure.

The foundation hopes the solutions created by its public-private partnership will become a model for the nation's other ports, which collectively handle \$9 billion worth of products each day.

"A host of security concerns in a world that is increasingly complex means we've got to... stay not one step but two or three steps ahead of those who want to harm us," Warner said. "And so that is not just a challenge for our nation, but particularly here for us."

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