

Male Speaker: Okay. Good. First question for the transcriber. Just say your name and spell it, please.

David Freeman: David Freeman, D-A-V-I-D, F-R-E-E-M-A-N.

MS: Okay. Mr. Freeman, you are not a native, I know, from just talking to you for a few seconds, of Los Angeles. First, when did you become first aware of the port and its activities here in Los Angeles?

DF: To be quite frank with you, I wasn't much aware of it until Antonio Villaraigosa named me to be the president of the Port Commission.

MS: How long have you lived here? You were with DWP before this. How long have you lived in the L.A. area?

DF: Well, about ten years. I just never had come down here. To my knowledge, I'd never seen the port before.

MS: So, when you did get down here, was that a big eye-opener learning?

DF: Well, it was a whole lot bigger deal than I ever imagined in terms of the physical size of it and also in the complexity and all the issues that were involved. I had heard of the port. It was mentioned during the campaign when Mayor Villaraigosa was elected. But I had not been down here.

MS: But you were involved in the national level as well. Did you understand the economic significance of the Port of Los Angeles? I mean, right now it is, as you know, 40 percent of the trade.

DF: I understand it now, but quite frankly, it wasn't something that was of knowledge to me. I was in the electric power field and followed national politics and knew a lot about some things, but the port just never came my way. Recognizing that I was in the merchant marine during World War Two and sailed on a T2 tanker, but it just wasn't part of my life in recent decades.

MS: I mean, the fact of the matter is that a lot of people, surprisingly, have no idea of this port.

DF: I think that's the normal situation in L.A. that they don't know the port exists and probably don't know today.

MS: So, when you encountered it, tell me a little bit more, what were your impressions as you encountered it for the first time and you were beginning to learn about it?

DF: Well, that this is a big deal. I mean, it was just the size, and the importance became very clear when I had some responsibility for dealing with it.

MS: One of the things that you are doing – you also explained how you got involved with the

commission. It was an appointment. But why the harbor, why not something else?

DF: That's a real good question. I keep asking the mayor why he sent me down here when I'm an electric power guy. We just had a ceremony just an hour or two ago that explains it. One of the best ways to clean up the port is to switch from burning stuff to using electricity. We've developed an all-electric tow truck which we unveiled today, that will haul a 30-ton container from the dock to the near-dock rail facilities. So, the fact that I have a background in the energy field helped me come to that idea and helped make it happen. So, there is that connection that was in the mayor's head but not in mine until I got down here.

MS: There is a pretty big, impressive power grid down here, though, isn't there?

DF: Well, it's just part of the DWP's grid. I mean, I guess it's impressive, but we serve electricity down here just like we do everywhere else in the city. It's not unique.

MS: But now all those cranes and all that stuff, is that not a pretty concentration?

DF: It's a nice load, but the Budweiser beer factory [laughter] in the Valley is a bigger load, I bet.

MS: Really? Than the port? Wow.

DF: I've been out there. I mean, they move a lot of beer.

MS: Yes, well, I like the free samples at the end, too. So, tell me how you got involved specifically. Just called you up? What were the circumstances of you coming in?

DF: The mayor and I, I think it's fair for me to say we're friends. I mean, I've known him since I was the manager at DWP. He used to come as a mere assemblyman and helped plant trees. I mean, he cares about the greening. I helped him in both campaigns. Our friendship was renewed and, I guess, grew some. When he became mayor, I was honored by being invited into his office. He and I talked about where I should be. I was assuming that he would send me back to the DWP. But he had the idea that he wanted someone like me at the port and offered me that position. Of course, I cheerfully accepted. It's quite an honor. It's great to be in your eighties and still be in the loop, so to speak.

MS: What did he see as the qualities you were going to bring to this job? What did you see and what did he see as the qualities you bring to the job?

DF: Well, you have to ask him what he saw. But what he says publicly is that I have a record of moving large public agencies in the right direction and that he thought my knowledge on the electric side would be useful in working with DWP to help electrification down here, and that I had run the Tennessee Valley Authority. I was a very experienced person and that he expressed the feeling this morning in public that he was lucky to have someone like me in his administration. I won't argue with him. [laughter]

MS: Also, your experience in the world of politics. This is a complex political relationship with the communities, Wilmington, San Pedro, the harbor. You are negotiating sometimes testy waters. I mean, what is that relationship, and what is your role in all that?

DF: Well, I do think that we've had similar issues in the electric power field and that I am sympathetic to cleaning up the port, which is what the community wants. We've tried to overcome a decade of hatred and bitterness. It's a transition. I mean, trust comes not from words, but from action and deeds. I think this electric truck that we developed on our own initiative is going to take us another step forward in trusting each other and also in getting the job done. So, I think I had a lot of experience in dealing with environmental and community organizations, which does come in handy. But after all, I'm just the president of the commission. Geraldine Knatz, our executive director, got the main role, day in and day out, and my other commissioners are of enormous help.

MS: What are the conflicting interests that sort of intersect around the commission?

DF: Well, we are a business with an obligation to serve the needs of commerce. That means that we have to grow and build stuff. The anger at the port from all these years when we didn't clean up still persists. So, there's tension between our program of growing green and some people feeling that we shouldn't grow at all. That's a tension that we're trying to overcome.

MS: Also, you are dealing with issues, for example, with the trucks and the new limitations on the trucks. You are getting pressures from the labor side as well on this. I mean, nobody is against making a healthier environment, but you still have these other things to balance. What are some of the other things?

DF: Well, we've had to deal with the issue of whether so-called owner-operators really are independent. In order to comply with the rules that we need to have clean trucks and to keep them clean, we've had to require that they be companies with employees so that we could hold someone responsible. We can't hold 16,000 individual truck drivers responsible. Of course, a clean truck can become dirty within a few months if it's not maintained properly.

MS: The Commission under your leadership and what's happening, and Geraldine is doing it too, what do you see as the biggest challenges that you face right now?

DF: Well, it's implementing our cleanup program and getting enough trust in the community so that they don't block our expansion program. We're making some progress, but the tension is still out there. I hope that people will understand that in order to really clean up, we have to have new projects where we have the leverage to force people. We're not a regulatory agency. So, there's not yet a full understanding that green growth really does go together and that we are serious and that it can happen. Also, the challenge is on the industry side. They see us as talking green growth and just doing green. So, we have to persuade the business community that we're serious about wanting their business. That's a challenge also.

MS: In the port itself, this is a long tradition of this being a recreational, tourist, all these things, which are somewhat have been gone by the by. But now there are plans to change that. Is that

another set of pressures? I mean, how do you have this big industrial complex and have acute –

DF: Well, we've got a \$1 billion capital budget for beautification and improving the livability and the looks of the waterfront. I think that we're improving the marina and creating more berths. So, we are not accepting the fact that the recreation part has to go by the way. On the contrary, we want to enlarge that. There's always a balance between more business and more jobs and letting people use the harbor for recreation. We're trying to strike that balance.

MS: I mean, it is one of the answers to the awareness of the port having something more down here. Long beach is doing it. People come down. Sometime they do not even know there is a working port down there to stroll around, the fishing –

DF: Yes, we hope to have an area as attractive as Long Beach, say, six, seven years from now. There's been a lot of talk of improving the waterfront. We're moving from talk to action. But these things take time. They take a lot of money. We get no return on that money. So, contrary to what people think, we are not a fountain of money. We have a fair amount, but it needs to be invested not just in recreation, but in expanding the terminals to take care of the business.

MS: You are a veteran. On a day-to-day basis, what is the hardest and most challenging part of your job?

DF: Keeping up with the emails.

MS: Why do you not tell me that, "My hardest part of my job is"?

DF: The hardest part of my job is to stay in touch with all the email traffic nowadays, and especially since I'm not paid. This is supposed to be an honorary position where you come to a board meeting twice a month. But I'm finding that about half of my time is spent on port business. But frankly, I love it.

MS: What do you love about it?

DF: Because I'm still in demand at eighty-two. It's a really good feeling.

MS: When your term – do you have any personal goals that you would like to say, "I would like to get done before I move on to another job"?

DF: Yes, I want to get all the projects that are in the queue now decided one way or the other within the next couple of years. That's my goal, and the Clean Air Action Program implemented. I mean, I'm having this interview on one of the happiest days of my life. We have, on our own, all by ourselves, with South Coast Air Quality District, developed a brand-new piece of technology, a truck that runs with zero pollution and very little noise. It will be the cheapest truck on the road. That's a pretty good accomplishment for the port of L.A. So, I'm feeling pretty upbeat right now.

MS: So, what is the process of implementation of this new vehicle?

DF: Oh, it is going to be mass-produced. Within two years, we won't be burning any fuel on the dock. All the vehicles will be all electric. Most of the traffic near and around the dock will be electric. We're going to clean this place up, including the greenhouse gases which the environmental community paid no attention to until we got here.

MS: Now, there is that cross. You mentioned it already. It is happening across the economy, which is that if green is more expensive, people are going to do that race to the bottom and find some other place that is not so green. It is cheaper.

DF: They can go. Bye-bye. We're not worried about that. The longshoremen are with us. We're going to organize green at every port. They ain't going to have any place on this earth to go. Because this civilization of the house is on death row. If we don't switch to cleaner fuels, we will be the last generation. More and more people are learning that. So, we're going to amp the ships. They can scream about it a little bit now, but they'll be amping the ships everywhere else around the world. Before long, there won't be no ships sailing.

MS: What about your competition? This is a big global, competitive world. Where do you see your competition coming from now and in the future?

DF: Well, Long Beach is our next-door neighbor and our big competitor. But on the jobs front, it's the same job market. So, if a ship comes to Long Beach rather than L.A. or vice versa, it's not going to change the economy any particular. So, between the two of us, we're not too worried about the competition. We have 70 percent of all the business on the West Coast. All the rest of them put together doesn't equal us.

MS: What about on a global scale, though? Is that not, more and more, becoming a global economy and Shanghai and Dubai and all these places?

DF: Yes, but the tennis shoes going to Anaheim are going to go through our port. Nobody's going to ship them through Seattle. The Inland Empire is a huge market of people. That demand is ours for keeps. The rest of the traffic, we'll get our share of it. We are the natural gateway to Asia where most of the goods are made. But nobody knows. I mean, it's a big business. Maybe it'll keep going up. Maybe it'll level off. In any event, it's going to be a huge source of employment and hopefully, an example of the cleanest port in the world, which is what Mayor Villaraigosa has told me that we've got to make happen.

MS: In the past, you probably know by now, this was the number one fishing port in the world. This was the number one oil port, the number one lumber port. Shipbuilding was major. All that is by the by. Do you think there is anything – containers now are where we are leading. Is there anything you think that is going to guarantee that is going to continue? Or is there going to be something else coming and change things?

DF: Well, the one thing great about the future is we don't know. I mean, right now we're a container port, but fruits and vegetables are important. They may come back stronger. Frankly, the tourist business is a big deal. We're planning to build a new cruise terminal. That's

important to the economy. But what the long-term trends will be, the one thing I've learned in eighty-two years is there's a lot I don't know. Any time you think you're getting too smart, remember this, that for 2,000, we knew about the wheel, and we carried luggage. It took us 2,000 years to put the two together. So, there's just a lot we don't know.

MS: Looking to the future, what do you think – aside from the environment which is clearly the most important development, what do you see the future, guessing, obviously, you see the future of this port and where it's going?

DF: Well, I think that it's going to be a large source of employment. Even if traffic goes down rather than up, it'll still be a large source of employment. But I don't know what the trends are going to be. If I had to guess, we may be near the peak of the traffic. We may be starting to diversify more into things that don't come in containers. Fruits and vegetables are going to be a bigger part of our diet. I can see a lot of trade from South America coming up here in the future. But by and large, it will continue to be a mix of a recreation facility-tourist attraction. If we really build the promenade as we were planning it, it could really be the place that enlivens the economy of San Pedro again. I think that's a real possibility. This place is still charming and lower in costs than most other places in L.A. So, that's kind of a sleeper that could just wake up on us.

MS: As a kind of a final thing, from your own personal point of view, the fact that people do not know about this port, the average person across this country, let alone the world. If you had to introduce somebody to the port of Los Angeles, what would you tell them and say, "This is who we are, this is what we are. This is why you should know us and know about us"?

DF: Well, I think we just say we're America's port. You know about Ellis Island. That's where the people came through. Well, L.A. is where the goods come through.

MS: That is pretty concise. Anything else you want to say that I did not ask about?

DF: No. [laughter]

MS: Do you ever run into a guy in the power business, (Walter Zeitler?)? He was in the San Diego Gas and Electric for a while.

DF: No. I don't know him.

MS: Yes. Well, he is dead now. I just thought you might know him. Well, that is it.

[end of transcript]