

## **Daily Press - Newport News (Virginia)**

### **A new carrier class**

The Newport News shipyard cuts an early piece of the steel for a new carrier, even as uncertainty lingers over when major construction will begin.

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NEWPORT NEWS -- The first of a new class of nuclear-powered aircraft carriers got its ceremonial start at Northrop Grumman Newport News on Thursday with the slicing of a 21/2-inch thick piece of steel.

That 15-ton section will one day cover void and tank space on the still unnamed CVN-21-class flattop, now code-named the CVN-78, to set sail from the James River about 10 years from now.

"This ship will be a testament to the carrier classes before her - and then some," said shipyard president Mike Petters. "The CVN-78 will have improved capability over the Nimitz-class - a class of ships that has proven very capable for three decades."

The event came against a backdrop of continuing uncertainty over when major construction on the \$13 billion warship will get started.

The plan in recent years has been that major construction on the carrier would begin in 2007. But President Bush's February budget proposal called for delaying that until 2008.

Now the Hampton Roads and Virginia congressional delegations - supported by lobbyists from Northrop Grumman and United Steelworkers - are scrambling to reverse that. "Keeping the start in '07 would certainly be a great thing for us, so we have to go work that process," said Matt Mulherin, the shipyard's senior vice president of programs, after Thursday's event.

"I think it's a great ship," he added. "The design is in great shape. So we provided the opportunity. Now we have to see if people want to take that opportunity."

The new carrier design includes, among other things, a new nuclear power plant that provides more shipboard electricity than the Nimitz-class, a new electromagnetic catapult system that will allow more planes to be launched, and a reduced need for sailors.

In their lobbying effort, some of the carrier's boosters have stressed that up to 1,000 people could be laid off and the cost of the ship could be even higher with a one-year delay. But Mulherin stopped short Thursday of predicting layoffs in Newport News if the delay holds.

"We're still going to look for new work to fill valleys," he said. "Certainly the goal, I think of everyone, is not to have layoffs."

Congresswoman Jo Ann Davis, R-Gloucester, and Congressman Bobby Scott D-Newport News, both attended Thursday's cutting ceremony. Both said they've invited fellow lawmakers to tour the Newport News shipyard in the coming months.

"A few of my colleagues in Congress just don't understand the complexity and scope of this operation," Davis said of the Newport News yard, terming it a national asset.

So far, the Virginia delegation hasn't succeeding in convincing enough fellow lawmakers of their case. "Not yet," Scott said, adding that legislation passed by the House doesn't include the language restoring the funding. "But money can still be shifted around."

Thursday's event was held in a spiffy new heavy-plate bay facility built specifically for the new carrier class, with Navy admirals, politicians and more than 250 shipyard workers in attendance.

Wayne Kania, a shipyard burning machine operator, cut the piece after it was signed by Petters, Davis, Scott, Newport News Mayor Joe Frank; Navy Rear Adm. David Architzel, the new carrier chief at the Naval Sea Systems Command; Navy Capt. Michael McMahon, the Newport News Supervisor of Shipbuilding; and Rear Adm. H. Denby Starling II, the commander of the Atlantic Fleet's Naval Air Force.

Although Thursday's event marked the ceremonial first piece of steel for the CVN-21 - complete with Petters telling the crowd they had just "witnessed history" - it wasn't technically the first piece of steel cut for the vessel. That was cut April 15.

Detailed design on the vessel is now well under way, said Michael Shawcross, the new vice president of the CVN-21 program. A new computerized 3-dimensional computer model of the warship is about 40 percent complete, though lots of work remains for design drawings.

Two large side-shell units are already under way for the CVN-21, Shawcross said, with seven of those expected to be in the works by the end of 2005. They'll be used to tweak the design.

"The schedule doesn't demand them now, but they're proving out technologies for us," he said. "We can use them to simplify or make things more efficient for the waterfront workers. We can fold that into the bulk of the design that we haven't gotten through yet."

Tracy Howard, a welder, and Demond Howard, a ship fitter, said new tools used to make pieces of the CVN-21 program are better than on prior ships they've worked on. "You can go a whole lot faster, and it's more precise," Howard said.

And Bill Joyce, the shipyard's director of process re-engineering and integration, said the 3-D design model is far superior to the old method of building wooden mock-ups. The new system is even tied in with purchasing systems, he added - so that the design

program can automatically send information to the purchasing department about what parts are needed, and when.