MBA students investigate redevelopment opportunities for Port of NOLA

March 31, 2026

Freeman School MBA students helped the Port of New Orleans plan redevelopment projects for its waterside properties. Photo courtesy of Port of New Orleans.

As a maritime port authority, the Port of New Orleans has jurisdiction of 34 miles of the Mississippi River at the convergence of 14,500 miles of inland waterways as well as more than 2,000 acres of industrial real estate that facilitate transportation of billions of dollars of consumer goods, infrastructure and raw materials annually. These substantial economic benefits could now compound thanks to redevelopment projects that harness the port's canal side properties in addition to its waterways. Redeveloping properties along those waterways has the potential to yield additional funds the Port could use to upgrade infrastructure and expand trade, but determining the best use of those sites requires intensive research.

Last fall, a group of Freeman MBA students partnered with the Port to develop targeted tenant recommendations for its waterside real estate. The consulting project was part of Freeman's MBA capstone course, a hands-on learning experience that puts students to work addressing real-world business challenges.

Emily Foley (MBA '26), an active-duty Coast Guard officer and member of the capstone team, said the project allowed her to examine a familiar maritime site from a new perspective.

"My background is in safety, regulation and compliance, but I've often been interested in the business side of maritime transportation and how supply chain dynamics work in the industry," she said. "This was the first time I got to approach maritime activity from a consultant framework."

Throughout the semester, the capstone team met with port staff, spoke with existing tenants, and conducted site visits to better understand supply chain dynamics and development constraints in the area. On one site visit, the team analyzed the Port's properties to determine which business would be most suitable as future maritime industrial tenants.

"Many of the properties are along the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal, so they have waterfront access," Foley said. "From our site visits, we were able to better understand that their plots come in various sizes and are in various states of repair. For some teammates who didn't have a maritime background, it helped them understand what types of vessels can transit the canal and what kinds of businesses would realistically operate there."

"We didn't realize going into it just how much of a real estate operation the port is," said Patrick Kiernan (MBA '26), a New Orleans native and former Deloitte CPA. "They're essentially a landlord port, managing large amounts of property and figuring out how to best utilize it. That was fascinating for me to see since I'm interested in real estate and finance."

Carmen Weigelt, assistant professor of strategy and entrepreneurship who oversaw the capstone project, encouraged the team to think carefully about how potential tenants would fit within the port's broader ecosystem.

"The students really had to brainstorm and figure out options for potential clients," Weigelt said. "They had to consider the strengths of the port and whether there

would be synergies with existing tenants in that neighborhood. Logistically, they also had to look at the land itself and then build a rationale for why a particular company would be a good fit.”

While working on the project, the team benefited from the advice and support of Emily Federer, Director of Sustainable Development at the Port of New Orleans.

“I met with the MBA team weekly to help them develop their proposal,” Federer said. “We coordinated with other departments within the port to help them gather information across real estate, business development and other sections to provide background information and business goals.”

In addition to analyzing data, the team studied redevelopment strategies used by other major ports in Houston, Mobile, Savannah and Miami.

“We looked at competitors in the region to see what they’re doing right and understand how the Port of New Orleans could capitalize on some of those ideas,” Foley said. “For instance, the Port of Miami is similar to New Orleans in that it brings in Latin American trade, and it’s a global leader in cruise ship traffic.”

At the conclusion of the project, the team presented its findings to Port of New Orleans representatives including Environmental Manager Brady

Skaggs and Director of Sustainable Development Emily Federer. From left: Brady Skaggs, Emily Federer, Patrick Kiernan, Kyler Gray, Marissa Yepez, Emily Foley, Grant Odom.

The team considered nine potential development concepts before narrowing their recommendations to four priority opportunities. Their top proposal focused on leasing property to advanced maritime manufacturer Saronic Autonomous Shipbuilding, a Houston-based defense contractor that builds autonomous vessels for government clients.

“Saronic is a newer defense contractor that’s growing quickly,” Kiernan said. “They’ve talked publicly about wanting to build a large facility called ‘Port Alpha,’ and we thought the Port of New Orleans would be well positioned to compete.”

“I think the Saronic partnership was our most exciting proposal,” Foley added. “It’s cutting-edge technology, and the company is in ongoing contracts through the country and Louisiana. They have a lot of potential.”

Another of the team’s recommendations centered on cold storage and refrigeration. The team said that the Port of New Orleans should create a space to house imports and exports of temperature-controlled goods like poultry and produce.

“We looked at how the Port could capitalize on its leadership in poultry exports and potentially expand into cold imports as well,” Foley said. “In terms of tenants, we thought Lineage Logistics would be a top contender. Lineage already operates in the Port of New Orleans, so we were looking at them to expand their current operations to model other major ports around the world.”

Additional proposals included developing a maritime training academy along the canal and constructing flexible warehouse space that could be built and adapted for a variety of cargo operations.

At the end of the semester, the team presented its findings to Port of New Orleans staff and stakeholders. Federer said she found the team’s solutions valuable for thinking through where the Port should go in the future.

“The presentation and recommendations were clear and very reasonable as future possibilities for the Port,” she said. “The team provided a professional document to the Port that can help us as we move into considerations for redevelopment and

improving business outcomes for our challenging historic industrial properties.”

Looking back, Kiernan said the experience stood out as one of the most rewarding parts of the MBA program.

“It felt like the most real-world project we did,” he said. “We got to pick an area we were interested in and really dive deep into it. It was a great example of learning by doing.”