

Dallas a Major Trade Center: Developments in the works to make it happen

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Hub of the trade wheel

Attention, insomniacs.

Here's a thought guaranteed to induce yawns, courtesy of the city of Dallas' latest task force, this one on economic development: The city needs a strategy, one that focuses on its historic strengths, including transportation and freight handling.

But wait. What's that ungodly racket coming from the southern part of the county, that part so desperate for new enterprises? Why, it's the new Union Pacific freight terminal, busy transferring containers stuffed with goods made in China from trains onto trucks. (OK, it's in Wilmer, not in Dallas, but many of the people who work there undoubtedly live in Dallas.)

And why are all these Dallas officials jetting off to Houston, Washington, Mexico and even China to meet with foreign-trade honchos? Why do they keep whipping out pens to sign long legal declarations with those folks? And why do they keep spouting words like "intermodal," "agile port" and "NAFTA impact zone"?

Well, we could load you down with details, but suffice it to say that sleep may have to wait. Because, with a little prompting from transportation experts and the Port of Houston, Dallas – and now all the cities in the southern part of the county – snapped to the fact the area they collectively encompass is positioned to be the dominant trade center in North America. If, that is, they act swiftly to put in place the infrastructure, the economic incentives and the legal agreements to make it happen.

The first battles – to persuade the federal and state governments not to bypass Dallas when expanding their highway networks – seem to have been substantially won. The city also has signed exploratory agreements with the ports of Houston and Manzanillo, Mexico, to handle and – in the case of Houston, store – containers bound by rail to and from those ports. Closer to home, the southern-tier cities have agreed in principle to sign a pact to act as one in developing new infrastructure – including, potentially, a new cargo airport – and courting trade-related companies.

Nothing exists on the ground yet; it's all on paper. But the "inland port" idea seems to have generated what the first President Bush called "the big mo" – which is more than you can say for many other recent plans for the southern sector.

Snooze at your peril.