

Dallas' maritime future?

Task force sought to establish land port for goods from gulf

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By Brendan M. Case / The Dallas Morning News

It's a long way from North Texas to saltwater, but that's not stopping civic leaders from envisioning a Port of Dallas.

Local leaders and officials from Houston and the U.S. Maritime Administration expect to announce a task force today to study the creation of an inland port in Dallas, a project they say would strengthen the area's role as a transportation hub.

The idea is to move the time-consuming sorting of containers inland, away from congested seaports. When a ship is delayed in port, it's not making money.

An inland port could also speed the flow of cargo between ships and North Texas' land transportation networks, which would carry goods to the rest of the country.

"The concept of an agile system is that you increase the velocity of the cargo moving through the system," said Richard Walker, the U.S. Maritime Administration's intermodal development director.

Connected with the Gulf Coast by rail, the Dallas Agile Port System would function as a shipping, receiving and distribution center for outbound cargo containers going to ports such as Houston, and for inbound freight traveling the other direction.

The Dallas-Fort Worth region already is a major distribution center, home to a vast network of railroad lines, highways and air-cargo facilities. Several intermodal facilities, notably Alliance Airport, are also located in the area.

Better transportation links could entice new companies to move to North Texas, creating jobs.

"It will act as a magnet for businesses," said Dallas City Council member Sandy Greyson.

In Northern Virginia, for example, the 16-year-old Virginia Inland Port has attracted numerous warehouses from large companies and other business activity.

"What we didn't realize at the inception was what a catalyst for economic development this transportation infrastructure could be," said Greg Edwards, the managing director of marketing and intermodal at the Virginia Port Authority.

Dallas' agile port system task force will be announced at a City Hall ceremony attended by representatives from the city of Dallas, Dallas County, Harris County, the Port of Houston Authority and the Mexican Port of Manzanillo, which is developing trans-Pacific service for U.S. customers.

Mr. Walker will represent the Maritime Administration, which is part of the U.S. Department of Transportation.

The task force will study how much money would need to be invested and what facilities would need to be built, among other issues.

The port project is part of the Dallas NAFTA Trade Corridor project, which is named for the North American Free Trade Agreement.

"There's a need to find new multimodal centers in the middle of our country," said David Dean, chief executive of Dean International Inc., a consulting firm retained by the city to help develop transportation projects. "We become very significant geographically."