

Inland port system may dock in Dallas

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DALLAS - A flurry of job-generating maritime commerce may soon appear in Dallas County, even though the nearest deep-water port is about 250 miles away, in Houston.

Creating an "agile inland port system" was discussed Friday by officials from the city of Dallas, Dallas County and their counterparts from Harris County, the Port of Houston Authority and the U.S. Department of Transportation's Maritime Administration.

The inland port would be a distribution center for shipping containers coming from or going to foreign countries. It would be served by trucking, high-speed rail and possibly a new cargo airport similar to Alliance Airport in north Fort Worth.

"This is an innovative feature for an inland community like Dallas," City Councilwoman Sandy Greyson said, "and we believe it will encourage substantial economic development for our region."

Greyson added that the new port system wouldn't take business from Alliance.

She said that trade traffic on Interstate 35E "is going up into the northeastern part of the country, whereas the trade traffic using 35W and Alliance Airport is going up into the interior of the country and into Canada."

The inland port would ease congestion at the Port of Houston which, port officials said, handled about 190 million tons of cargo in 2003. According to its Web site, the port's high volume makes it "first in the United States in foreign water-borne commerce, second in total tonnage, and sixth in the world."

Officials on Friday said they do not know how much it would cost to build the inland port or where they would put it, and they appointed a task force to study those issues. City

Councilman Bill Blaydes said he hoped it could be built within three years.

Greyson noted, however, that costs will likely be kept low because much of the necessary infrastructure already exists, including local highways and interstates.

She added that the Union Pacific Railroad has a large intermodal facility in Mesquite and another under construction in the Wilmer-Hutchins area.

"We have plenty of vacant land in southern Dallas County to add warehousing and distribution facilities to the ones we already got," she said, "so we don't have to spend a lot of money to begin to put this port system in place."

Houston County Judge Robert Eckels said the inland port would create other economic advantages.

"What you will find, as we do in Houston, is that easy access to cheap transportation lowers the price of products and goods throughout the whole region, so it will be a tremendous benefit to the folks in Tarrant County as well," he said.