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Southern Dallas hopes to snag inland port

By Margaret Allen
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Southern Dallas County will begin to see its biggest-ever economic shot in the arm later this year if the Port of Houston Authority and local governments succeed in designating an official “inland port” here.

The freight rail facility would be the Port of Houston’s first inland port – essentially an extension of the port lying farther inland. At such a facility, ocean containers loaded with freight can be picked up, dropped off, documented and received, just as if they were arriving or departing the ocean port in Houston. The freight would move to and from Houston by rail.

City of Dallas officials predict an inland port would attract billions of dollars in additional rail, truck and air freight to North Texas. It also would be a catalyst for construction of new distribution centers, warehouses and company offices for those who ship, receive and handle cargo.

The city has targeted the intersection of U.S. interstates 20 and 45 – which is largely undeveloped – for all the real estate development expected to arise from the port. The inland port is part of a larger city project, the Dallas NAFTA Trade Corridor Project, named for the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Establishing Task Forces

Details are scarce, explained Fort Worth-based Dick Schiefelbein, railroad coordinator for the Port of Houston Authority. “It’s the first time it’s ever been done here,” Schiefelbein said. “But there are a lot of ways to skin the cat.”

The City of Dallas is working now with the Port of Houston and cities in southern Dallas County to establish several task-force groups.

Each one will address a different aspect of the port-driven project. Among them: who would own and operate the facility; cost and funding; location of the port; harmonizing property tax structures across the taxing entities in southern Dallas County for companies that locate operations there to use the port; creating a Foreign Trade Zone around the port; establishing a rail intermodal route between Dallas and Houston; and deciding where in the southern region to build a cargo airport.

Each task force will include members from Cedar Hill, Lancaster, DeSoto, Hutchins, Wilmer and other southern Dallas County suburbs, as well as the Port of Houston, according to Sandy Greyson and Bill Blayes, members of the Dallas City Council and co-chairs of the NAFTA corridor project. “We’re not having the cities within our region tugging and competing with one

another,” Greyson said. “This will benefit all of us.”

An inland port facility would likely include office space, a terminal building and a rail intermodal yard for staging and loading hundreds of 20-foot ocean containers moving in and out on their way to Houston, elsewhere in the nation, Mexico or Canada. New supersized ships can carry 8,000 containers each, filling 20 trains a mile long with double-stacked containers.

With Dallas 240 miles north of Houston up Interstate 45, a Dallas County inland port would be the first in the nation located so far from its coastal host. The U.S. Maritime Administration has said it hopes to make the Dallas County inland port a model for the rest of the nation.

Perfect Match

In October, City of Dallas officials approached the Port of Houston with the idea, which appealed to port authorities, Schiefelbein said. Container traffic is growing by double digits at the Port of Houston, the world’s sixth-largest port, he said. An inland port would continue to ensure speedy delivery of containers to market.

Over the next ten years, container traffic in the Gulf of Mexico will grow as much as 23%, said Jim Edmonds, chairman of the Port of Houston Authority. Houston handles 64% of container movements in the gulf and 94% in Texas. An inland port would free up docks to accommodate the increased freight, Edmonds said.

Southern Dallas County already has the needed infrastructure, say Greyson and Blaydes. It’s home to the so-called North American Free Trade Corridor – Interstate 35. And federal lawmakers are expected this summer to designate Interstate 20 through there as a “Congressional High Priority Corridor” from I-35 in Dallas County east via Interstate 635 and north to Interstate 30, continuing on through Little Rock, Ark., and Memphis, Tenn., via Interstate 40. The designation makes the corridor eligible for federal highway money.

At the same time, Union Pacific Railroad has two major intermodal yards in southern Dallas County, one in Mesquite – the third largest in its system – and one set to open in Wilmer-Hutchins this summer.

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