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'Inland seaport' wave of future for county

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Southern Dallas County is on the verge of reinvention, the likes of which have never been seen here before.

The first signs of what will happen are already visible along Interstate 45. As you travel south of Loop 12, you can see the stacks of railroad cars peaking above the roadside and the giant warehouses already under construction.

Without a body of water in sight, this broad stretch of farmland is poised to become a seaport.

Officials in four cities - Dallas, Lancaster, Wilmer and Hutchins - are working feverishly to create this "inland seaport" that will transform thousands of acres of vacant land into a distribution hub for Asian-made consumer goods.

These shipments currently arrive in huge cargo containers at Long Beach, Calif., the nation's second-busiest port. The annual number of containers (6.7million) and the number of vessel visits (5,300) has overwhelmed the port, requiring ships to wait up to eight days to unload.

To reduce the backup, about 60percent of these unopened containers would be shipped by rail from Long Beach to southern Dallas County. Once here, the goods would be divided up, or even warehoused, until they could be distributed via truck, train and even airplane to the Midwest and East Coast.

Southern Dallas already has gotten a taste of such goods with the opening last year of the Dallas Intermodal Terminal along I-45. (Mesquite and Alliance Airport in Fort Worth have similar operations.)

What makes the southern end of Dallas County so attractive as a port are the railroad lines (Union Pacific and Burlington Northern Santa Fe), the confluence of major highways (Interstates 20, 35 and 45) and the nearness of two general aviation airports (Mesquite and Lancaster).

"If you look at the road and the railroads, they all come through Dallas," said Dan McAuliffe, vice president of development for the Dallas office of The Allen Group. The San Diego-based company already has locked up nearly 6,000 acres for warehouse and commercial development.

The development could spur as many as 30,000 jobs in the next 20 to 30 years. They would range from \$10- to \$15-an-hour warehouse jobs to possibly more lucrative office and management work.

"The project has doubled in size in the planning stages," Mr. McAuliffe said. "The initial plan was for 2,500 acres."

Transforming a farming community into an industrial hub might scare some people, but not the elected leaders of this long-neglected area. They visited Long Beach recently and came away convinced that their increased tax revenues would make the venture worthwhile.

"We've been the backwaters of the metroplex for too long," said Joe Tillotson, Lancaster's mayor and a strong proponent of the port.

As he drove me around the cornfields and sleepy subdivisions of his community, Mr. Tillotson gave a surprisingly candid assessment of its flaws, pointing out poorly maintained roads and the lack of sewer and water service in many sections.

"The whole complexion of Lancaster is going to change in the next three to five years," he vowed. "We're not going to be known for our country lanes anymore."

www.allengroup.com



Dallas officials have embraced the project, embarking on a recent trade mission to China, where they asked manufacturers in nine cities to consider the proposed Dallas route.

"The southernmost route from the West Coast is the most economical way to reach the East Coast and Canada," said Dallas City Council member Bill Blaydes, who led the coalition. "The trade mission to China was to introduce Dallas as that crossroads."

While it is easy to get excited about this project, there are a number of bridges to be crossed, including future requests for tax abatements from the cities involved and environmental protection.

We also need to put aside our anger over what these foreign goods represent to the U.S. economy: our lost manufacturing sector.

At least with an inland port in southern Dallas, these products would be passing through local hands.

For that, we'd have to be grateful.