

# Long Beach

## BUSINESS JOURNAL

March 3- March 16, 2009

### Ten Years of University-Industry Partnership



■ Trade and Transportation

By Thomas O'Brien

This year marks the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the State of the Trade and Transportation Industry Town Hall meeting, sponsored by California State University's Center for International Trade and Transportation and the METRANS Transportation Center. The Town Hall has been a unique partnership of the university and industry for a decade, and began at a time when goods movement was not on the radar screen for many, even in our region.

The Town Hall is designed to offer a neutral forum where people who don't always agree can discuss critical issues in a respectful manner and in the spirit of cooperation. That means longshore labor and terminal operator, trucker and community resident. Industry experts are there for the give-and-take with each other and the attendees. A video - produced specifically for the event and made available to industry and the community as an educational tool - sets the stage and provides some context for the discussion. This year's Town Hall is titled "The Decade Ahead: Jobs, Cargo, Competition and You." Its theme is the competitiveness of the San Pedro Bay ports both now, in a time of recession, and in the future when we expect new challenges to come from ports on the East Coast, the Gulf Coast, and the Pacific Northwest.

Given the impact that any erosion in market share will have on management, labor and local industry, there may be much more consensus this year than we've seen at previous Town Halls. I expect there to be much discussion of the local business climate, which means that container fees, the clean-truck program, and the ports' recently adopted business incentive package will be on the table. However, I also expect that the tenor of the debate will reflect the urgency of the situation for all stakeholders. That means less finger-pointing, more common ground.

That hasn't always been the case. Over the past decade, the Town Hall has offered a glimpse into an industry whose awareness of the local community and state and local government has evolved over time. In 1999, when the first Town Hall was held, the topic was *Global Connectivity and Collective Responsibility for the Future*. That's a familiar theme, but the landscape was vastly different. The local ports had just posted a record year in 1998, moving 7.5 million TEUs. That figure would double in the coming decade. The Alameda Corridor had not yet opened; and ports and terminal operators were not looking at a regulatory agenda from state and local government that would directly impact their day-to-day operations.

Over the next few years however, the Town Hall discussions reflected a changing industry, one facing the pressures of increased trade volumes and a higher level of scrutiny from the community and elected officials. The second and third Town Halls addressed labor issues and the future of goods movement in the region at a time when cargo volumes were increasing at double-digit rates. Between June 1999 and June 2000, the Port of Los Angeles alone saw a 26 percent increase.

By the time of the fourth Town Hall in March 2002, the 9/11 attacks had raised the profile of our nation's ports from a security perspective, and the spotlight shone brightest on the Ports of L.A. and Long Beach, given their role as the nation's largest trade gateway. What we forget is how rapidly international trade recovered in the wake of the devastating attacks, and how our local focus shifted once again to other matters that could affect its growth. In the run-up to the fifth Town Hall in 2003, the Alameda Corridor opened, raising the expectations for the ability of rail to take trucks off of increasingly congested streets. The fall of 2002 saw the acrimonious contract negotiations between the ILWU and the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA), resulting in a shutdown of the ports. Subsequent Town Halls have dealt with the aftermath of increasing trade, a growing awareness of the environmental impacts of that trade and the always present issue of labor-management relations.

This year, the hope is that the rather smooth ILWU-PMA contract negotiations of last summer are an indication of a new spirit of cooperation on the docks. For the moment, the focus has shifted to the role that the environmental, regulatory and security environments will play in either helping or hindering a recovery at the ports in both the short and the long term.

Ten years of Town Halls have provided some useful insight as we try to make our best predictions about the decade ahead. First, we can expect regulatory agencies at the national and state level to play a larger role. Second, the ports and terminal operators, now fully cognizant of the fact that their operations have both positive and negative impacts, can be expected to pursue measures like the Clean Air Action Plan that make them active partners in the regulatory process.

The proof of the changing landscape for the trade and transportation industry, and the attention it has garnered from so many different stakeholders at so many different levels, is the number of forums where these issues are now discussed. That was not the case when the Town Halls began in 1999. We are proud of the role that the university has played in laying the groundwork for so much discussion and debate, and look forward to continuing to foster information exchange that positively contributes to resolution of port-related conflicts for all stakeholders.

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