

Competitive Visioning



■ Trade and Transportation

By Thomas O'Brien

I recently attended an event sponsored by California State University, Long Beach's (CSULB) Center for Commercial Deployment of Transportation Technologies (CCDoTT). Titled Delivering the Goods, its goal was to re-think and reenvision the goods movement system in Southern California. Industry leaders, researchers and policy makers came together to discuss the relationship between economy, technology, the environment and the future of international trade in Greater Los Angeles.

I spent most of my time in a technology breakout group. The discussion was lively and touched upon not only transportation but energy as well. The group considered, among other things, the potential for electric vehicles riding along truck-only lanes on the 710 Freeway. And we discussed the financing and policy frameworks that might support planning for, testing and deployment of advanced technologies.

The discussion often came back to the question of reasonableness: Is there a market for these technologies? How do you guarantee that the public sector, the community and private industry all realize benefits in a world of unintended consequences? As one participant put it quite nicely, one man's vision is another man's hallucination.

The nature of the debate at the CCDoTT event is evidence that there is still not consensus surrounding the future of trade in the region. The fact that it was able to bring so

many key decision-makers together is evidence that interested parties believe that the outcomes of the visioning process matter. And we still have competing visions: L.A. vs. Long Beach, Southern California vs. the Pacific Northwest, East Coast vs. West Coast, the U.S. vs. Canada.

Contrast this with the recent unveiling by the European Commission (EC) of a three-year program to increase awareness about the shipping industry on the part of the general public and boost industry recruitment. Its official name is the Key Performance Indicator (KPI) Initiative, but it's been labeled by some as Europe's Sexy Shipping Initiative. A joint effort between Brussels and industry, one of its principal goals is to improve shipping's image and the public's overall awareness of the maritime sector and international trade.

In a press release about KPI, a representative with the EC's Directorate General for Transport and Energy said "In January, we brought out our maritime strategy for the next ten years so we have regulated a lot and created one of the best regulatory environments in the world in terms of safety and environment. It is now the time to capitalize and look forward." The EC actions do not disregard questions of technology, the economy and the environment; instead, KPI promotes industry as part of a comprehensive media and educational campaign. Perhaps more important, it also looks at the way information about shipping is collected and distributed to the public. Real data about the costs and benefits of trade-related activities make it easier to sell your vision. Shipping is even sexier with real numbers behind it.

There are examples of similar campaigns here in the U.S. In recent years, it was not uncommon to see billboards in and around New York sponsored by the NY Shipping Association arguing that "Ports Mean Prosperity." Yet, there hasn't been the kind of broad-based public-private

approach suggested by KPI. Getting to that point in this country will take some monumental strides; and as an educator and a researcher, I am interested in the role that research plays in generating the data behind competing visions.

That research will be the subject of another Long Beach event. On October 21-23 CSULB, along with its partners at USC in the METRANS Transportation Center, will host the 3rd National Urban Freight (NUF) Conference. The purpose of NUF is to examine the impacts of goods movement and international trade in metropolitan areas. The conference focuses on the urban aspects of goods movement, and it draws participants from throughout the U.S. and abroad representing academia, industry, and government. It is a unique opportunity for researchers to share their findings with each other, and for industry and policymakers to tell the academic community what research is most relevant “on the ground.”

This year’s NUF has significant European representation. The keynote address will be given by Professor Eddy Van de Voorde of the University of Antwerp, a leading researcher whose work covers the international trade spectrum from the maritime sector to air transport.

Who knows what will come out of the exchange? Our local ports have been at the forefront of innovation in response to environmental pressures. We’ll have those lessons to share. And we may learn something about the development of a nationwide - even continent-wide - vision for trade and transportation, and the relationship between efforts in the academy, and the response of industry and national and EU-level policy makers.

I know that our nation has the reputation of being puritanical at times, so maybe we’re not ready for our own sexy shipping campaign. But maybe we’ll find that the research allows us to start with the premise that shipping is, at the very least, good.