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Industry, Government and Academic Leaders



■ Trade and Transportation

By Thomas O'Brien

The recent news that the U.S. Congress passed trade agreements with Colombia, Panama and South Korea garnered a lot of attention in the U.S. press, and rightly so. The negotiation process for each was painstaking, the outcomes uncertain, and the implications great for the entire country. For Southern California, our geographic proximity to the Pacific Rim and our financial, institutional and cultural connections to South Korea in particular mean that a new trade agreement is an opportunity for the entire region.

Living in one of the nation's largest trade gateways means you get a lot of opportunities like this even if they are sometimes born out of necessity. The ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach and their industry partners can take great pride in the leadership they have shown in developing environmental programs that are now being implemented (or at least considered) throughout the world. State and local government played a role too. In the absence of political and legislative pressure, some of the advancements might not have occurred. And I'm pleased to say that colleges and universities have also contributed, educating the goods movement workforce and providing a neutral forum where stakeholders with sometimes disparate interests can find common ground as new programs are developed.

I was reminded of the importance of leadership from industry, government and the education sector while attending the National Urban Freight Conference which was recently held in Long Beach. The conference is sponsored by the METRANS Transportation Center at Cal State Long Beach and USC. It is the only conference of its kind focusing on the intersection of goods movement and cities. And it makes sense that it's here. Other places like New York and Chicago can claim to be urban centers as well as centers of trade-related activity. But

no one else in this country has the combination of mega-city and mega-port like we do, not to mention all of the rail activity and support services that make trade possible.

As a result, our responsibility as an academic institution extends beyond our commitment to our students and the local community, including government and industry partners. We have a responsibility to make sure that our exploration of trade and transportation issues through research, conferences and educational programs is shared with colleagues in other parts of this country and in other parts of the world.

This was the fourth National Urban Freight Conference, and since the first one was held in 2006, the participation of industry and government representatives has grown. So has the number of international attendees. I think this is because we have found an audience for information that is being shared by the key decision makers from industry, leading policymakers and the top researchers in the field.

A couple of sessions seemed particularly eye opening for colleagues from places like Canada, Mexico, Asia and Europe. A frank discussion on what matters to the industry involved a panel of representatives from trucking, rail, industrial and commercial real estate, and the world of third party logistics. The public sector and academics in the room heard an urgent plea for rational policymaking as well as an honest appraisal of both the intended and unintended consequences of decisions made in city halls and state legislatures across the country.

While this kind dialogue is not unique to Southern California, I heard a number of comments from attendees from other places that went something like, "How can you get these people to come to a research conference?" or "How do you get industry to answer your telephone call?" The same comments followed a lunch time discussion with Richard Steinke, the executive director of the Port of Long Beach, and a panel on the challenges of drayage trucking. A site visit to the Port of Los Angeles, a warehouse and a transloading facility also seemed to impress the participants, not only because of the scale of operations (you forget how impressive our trade infrastructure is when it's just outside your window), but because of the willingness of our industry partners to open their doors – and gates – to a bus full of wide-eyed conference attendees who just happen to think that cranes and conveyor belts are cool.

It wasn't always like this. It used to be that inquiries from educators and researchers were looked upon with suspicion. I don't think we had done a good enough job of articulating our role in educating the industry's future workforce, or in explaining to the people who live and work in the shadow of the ports just how the industry works. We also had not yet established ourselves as a place where community concerns about goods movement could be discussed in an honest but respectful way. Over time however, as trust was developed, we found an outlet for our research and our educational programs with people from different industry and governmental sectors. As a result, as conference participants tried to read the name badges of the people sitting next to them, I hope they were pleasantly surprised to see people affiliated with both the ports and the ILWU in the same room as officials from state and local planning agencies and educators from places like Germany, Belgium and New Zealand. The common thread was an interest in learning more about freight and how it moves through our metropolitan areas.

A conference report and presentations from the National Urban Freight Conference will be made available at <http://www.metrans.org/nuf/2011/>. This is one other way that the work being done in the classroom, in the halls of government and at the ports, warehouses and rail yards is made known to a diverse audience around the globe. It is also a demonstration of this region's leadership of which we should all be proud.

(Dr. Thomas O'Brien is the director of research for the Center for International Trade and Transportation at CSULB and associate director for Long Beach Programs for the METRANS Transportation Center, a partnership of USC and CSULB. For past articles in this series, please go to www.ccpe.csulb.edu/IndustryArticles.)