

Sustainable Freight?



■ Trade and Transportation

By *Thomas O'Brien*

The Long Beach Board of Harbor Commissioners preliminarily approved two incentive programs designed to bring cargo to the port by helping to reduce the cost of complying with environmental measures. The first of the two programs waives dockage fees for ships that reduce speeds as they approach the ports and use shore side power or other pollution-cutting technologies at berth. The second program will offer a \$5- per-container incentive for cargo that travels by on-dock rail – and not truck – from the port.

The local ports have taken the lead in developing programs like these that accommodate growth in trade while addressing the impacts of freight on local communities. They have to in order to remain competitive but still secure their “social license” to operate from elected officials and the public. As a result, the ports have found a way to gain some credibility in a discussion of sustainable growth.

Too often however, the sustainability movement excludes freight from the planning process. The problem is that this may actually make creating livable and sustainable communities more difficult. Like other uses that are considered to be integral to sustainable living (including open space, quality residential environments and transit), freight needs dedicated urban spaces, like those for loading and unloading, to avoid negatively impacting the quality of life for residents and businesses alike.

Early in his first administration, President Obama developed a sustainability model that tied infrastructure investments, especially transportation investments, to housing, land use and the environment. The model came with a set of livability principles to guide federal funding programs, policies, and legislation. The principles include enhancing economic competitiveness and making targeted investments that build upon strategies like transit-oriented development, mixed-use developments and land recycling. Neither principle references the need to increase capacity for freight movements. Similarly, smart growth principles have coalesced around mixed use development, compact building design, walkable communities, preservation of open space, and public transit but without

addressing that role that freight plays in providing the goods and services that help to make a community livable in the first place.

At the state level, Senate Bill (SB) 375 requires California’s 18 metropolitan planning organizations to align regional transportation, housing and land use plans and to prepare a Sustainable Communities Strategy (SCS) to reduce the amount of vehicle miles travelled in the region. While SB 375 does not target the trade and transportation sector, the impact on goods movement is great. Like the national livability and sustainability principles, at the more local level where the SCS is developed, freight is rarely part of the vocabulary of urban sustainability. It should be. Compact building design and a concentration of activity generate freight and pedestrian conflicts, slow the movement of freight, and result in congestion, pollution, noise, excess energy consumption, and greater accident risks for pedestrians, bicyclists and passenger cars. Smart growth may also require more frequent and concentrated deliveries and pickups. Denser urban environments like those considered desirable in newly revitalized urban cores also generate significant trips tied to service delivery (trash pickup, maintenance services, etc.) but with limited parking and loading facilities and competition for scarce road, curb and sidewalk space. When cities respond by limiting truck size or access, it in turn impedes freight movements.

Toolkits for sustainable development also rarely incorporate freight. In fact, traffic calming solutions like roundabouts and pedestrian-friendly environments with limited (or prohibited) vehicle access actually constrain freight movements or displace traffic to other and in some cases less direct and efficient routes. Inadequate loading and parking facilities result in illegal double parking which in turn increases local street congestion and increases travel times for both passenger vehicles and trucks.

Zoning and planning standards for new residential and commercial developments may provide an opportunity to create new parking and loading spaces that accommodate freight. But redevelopments or infill developments may, on the other hand, create new problems. In infill developments where freight-related land uses such as warehouses and rail yards already exist, the implementation of a desired smart growth or sustainable plan can cause encroachment on freight land uses and introduce new conflicts where none existed.

The problems are challenging but not intractable. As the ports – and their supply chain partners – have proven, it’s possible to move goods in an environmentally sustainable manner. But it first requires accepting the notion that freight is part of the solution.

Dr. Thomas O'Brien is the Interim Executive Director for the Center for International Trade and Transportation (www.ccpe.csulb.edu/citt) at CSULB and the Associate Director of Long Beach Programs for the METRANS Transportation Center (www.metrans.org). METRANS is a joint partnership of the University of Southern California and California State University, Long Beach.