

Group Sees Detroit as Great Lakes Freight Gateway

by Gerald Scott
News Dept.

The Great Lakes are hot. Well, this being the dead of winter, the water in the Great Lakes is pretty frigid, to be sure, but as an entity the five Great Lakes seem to have a renewed vibrancy these days.

Three months ago, a major marketing report out of Pennsylvania cited the Great Lakes for being a jobs and economic driver – much more so than we lately imagined.

Then, earlier this summer, the Detroit/Wayne County Port Authority opened its new public marine passenger terminal just west of the RenCen with promises of regular stops by commercial passenger tour boats and military ships in the near future.

Then, perhaps most intriguing, a local group called Great Lakes Global Freight Gateway (GLGFG) is calling for major developments in and around Detroit to make the city a 21st century inland port power in seaport-to-rail, lake-to-rail, or river-to-rail Midwest cargo handling and distribution.

On its Web site, the GLGFG group presents its short business case as follows:

“The Great Lakes Global Freightway Project presents a plan to transform Detroit, Southeast Michigan, and the adjacent counties in Ontario into a global freight gateway to and from the U.S. Midwest,” it reads.

“The plan builds on the existing strengths of the region in freight transport infrastructure – especially highway and rail, as well as inland waterway – and in logistics human capital to transform Southeast Michigan and Southwest Ontario from a motor vehicle manufacturing hub into a 21st Century manufacturing, distribution, and transportation center,” it continues.

“The plan also takes advantage of the region’s geographic position at the single-most advantageous river crossing point between the U.S. and Canada, connecting the Midwest to the world through the Port of Halifax via the CN Rail



The Port of Long Beach, above, is a major ocean freight-to-rail cargo distributor. The local Great Lakes Freight Gateway project seeks to make Detroit more like Long Beach – or even like Joliet, Ill., which is the largest such “inland port” in the U.S.

road and through the Port of Montreal via the Canadian Pacific (CP) Railway.

“Designed to create agglomeration economies in the freight transportation sector, the Great Lakes Global Freightway Project inherently rests on partnerships. Michigan’s success in global freight transportation requires it to act as a strategic partner for one or more seaports.”

In short, the Great Lakes Global Freight Gateway is quietly seeking to do for rail cargo containerization in this industry what Robert Ficano’s long-conceived “aerotropolis” surrounding the Detroit Metro and Willow Run Airports in Wayne County might some day do with air freight.

One of the brains behind the concept of a Great Lakes Gateway is Dr. Michael Belzer, associate professor at Wayne State University in Detroit.

Belzer is associate professor in the Department of Economics of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at WSU. He also is associate director of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation’s Trucking Industry Program, one of more than 20 Sloan Industry Centers.

Belzer discussed the grander ideas surrounding the Great Lakes Freight initiative in an interview at a WSU campus coffee shop recently.

“There’s no end to the inventiveness you can come up

with if you want to do it,” Belzer said in a summary statement.

Belzer is excited about the possibility for Detroit becoming an “inland port” to further help offload container ships coming into Halifax, New Jersey, Baltimore and other key ports on the East Coast, all of which are a short freight rail run to the Detroit area.

He’s excited because metro Detroit has much of the same infrastructure ingredients to do this as other reputable U.S. water-to-rail ports such as Long Beach, Calif., or even Joliet, Ill.

Unknown to the nation, with 6,000 developed acres, Chicago and Illinois politicians took the excess U.S. Army land belonging to the former Joliet Arsenal and since 1998 have converted it into the largest such “inland port” in the country. Joliet more than even Chicago proper is now the largest “flipper” of lake-to-rail and truck cargo containers in the country, all due in part to Joliet’s proximity to Lake Michigan and the Chicago River and rail system.

Meanwhile, according to Belzer and his Great Lakes Freight group, think of the city of Detroit and its 139 square miles, of which some 40 to 50 square miles are now described as “abandoned.”

Why not gather and convert land in such a way that



A local group, Great Lakes Freight Gateway, is seeking to develop Detroit into a major intermodal lake-rail-freight distribution center. Pictured is the modern laker Earl W. (now the Manitowoc) passing the Renaissance Center on the Detroit riverfront.

Detroit becomes another Joliet for offloading the new generation of giant sea-bound container ships that right now can only largely unload in Halifax, a true deepwater port on the East Coast?

“I look at it as an ideal opportunity, but we have not been able to get their (politicos’) attention,” Belzer said.

“We have tried and tried and tried, I had a high-level guy send a letter to the mayor, knows the mayor very well, but as far as I know there has been no response.”

Detroit being Detroit, Belzer cites some of the usual local problems endemic in getting any major enterprise off the ground these days.

“Whatever the reason is, penetrating to get their attention is very difficult,” Belzer continued.

“One of the physical problems . . . one of the legal is that nobody seems to know who owns what land, where . . . the institutional problems are extraordinary – could never happen in a modern society (one would think).”

Usual beaureacratc problems aside, Detroit itself, much less the suburbs, seems to have the ingredients to host a major new regional or national rail yard and ship-

ping station to rival Joliet’s.

“I think it’s a great solution to Detroit’s problems,” he said. “Frankly, I’ve presented this to community group audiences in Detroit and they get it. I present this rail distribution center/consolidation model, what we call now the Great Lakes Global Gateway.

“They’ve got to have an offensive strategy. The question is, where are we going to go? I’m sorry, but (urban) farming ain’t it. Urban farming is a statement of value and it says the city’s value is negligible.

“The city needs to be re-purposed for the modern era. It was purposed for an early 20th century kind of economic development. It was a boom town, it exploded when auto exploded, but it turns out that by 1950, it peaked, it was on the way down already.”

Again, Belzer and his group believe Detroit has all of the ingredients to do this, including geographic advantage on the Detroit River with access to the Great Lakes, existing rail lines that cut across both the U.S. and Canada, as well as more than enough idle land in Detroit itself to host a major rail freight terminal.

But it would also need major money, as well as the co-



PHOTO: GERALD SCOTT
Wayne State professor Dr. Michael Belzer is the champion behind the Great Lakes Freight Gateway project, which seeks to develop Detroit into a mega intermodal rail terminal.

operation of Detroit, Lansing, Washington, D.C., and Ottawa, together. And, as Hamlet said, well, “Ay, there’s the rub.”

But still, as possible industrial ideas go for where a struggling 21st century Detroit might find a huge local jobs generator, the Great Lakes Global Freight Gateway idea seems worth discussing.

After all, if a suburb of Chicago can put together the land and infrastructure to become a thriving inland port, well, why can’t Detroit?

EPA Issues ‘Fuel Standards’ for 2012

WASHINGTON – The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) last week finalized the 2012 percentage standards for four fuel categories that are part of the agency’s Renewable Fuel Standard program (RFS2).

EPA continues to support greater use of renewable fuels within the transportation sector every year through the RFS2 program, which encourages innovation, strengthens American energy security, and decreases greenhouse gas pollution.

The Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007 (EISA) established the RFS2 program and the annual renewable fuel volume targets, which steadily increase to an overall level of 36 billion gallons in 2022.

To achieve these volumes, EPA calculates a percentage-based standard for the following year. Based on the standard, each refiner and importer determines the minimum volume of renewable fu-

el that it must ensure is used in its transportation fuel.

The final 2012 overall volumes and standards are:

- Biomass-based diesel (1.0 billion gallons; 0.91 percent);
- Advanced biofuels (2.0 billion gallons; 1.21 percent);

- Cellulosic biofuels (8.65 million gallons; 0.006 percent)

- Total renewable fuels (15.2 billion gallons; 9.23 percent).

EISA specifies a one billion-gallon minimum volume requirement for that category.

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