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Developers tout inland ports to ease congestion

Terminals at Kamloops and even Saskatchewan could provide answers as Vancouver wrestles goods transportation issue

Andrew Petrozzi

Inland port proposals as far east as Kamloops and even Saskatchewan are being touted as potential solutions to the Lower Mainland's increasing port congestion and industrial land costs.

Both schemes have been cautiously welcomed by the Vancouver Port Authority, which is seeking ways to mitigate escalating logistical challenges surrounding the transportation of goods.

"We are particularly interested in an intermodal transfer centre, because we believe that is the area that has the potential to expand or extend the capabilities of our local marine terminals," said Peter Xotta, director of business development group for the Vancouver Port Authority.

Over the next three to five years, he added, the port authority would be primarily focusing on maximizing the capacity of its current operations.

"The analysis we did suggested that before the VPA gets involved in building facilities outside the marine terminals, we should exhaust all opportunities to continue to find ways to improve the efficiency and capabilities of our existing facilities," he said.

"That, in essence, is where we've landed, notwithstanding the opportunities that might exist for those facilities outside the Lower Mainland, and we would absolutely support those if they are generally about containerization and moving goods in and out of the Port of Vancouver. We want to find ways to support that, short of investment."

Xotta was recently in Kamloops for the presentation of a feasibility study by Venture Kamloops and the Thompson Rivers University's Advanced Technology Centre, which envisions an inland intermodal container facility.

"Kamloops' highway and rail network provides excellent service, access and intermodal linkages for the transportation of lumber, pulp and finished goods to both domestic and international markets," read the study's executive summary.

Meantime, Saskatchewan Agrivision and the Saskatchewan Trade Export Partnership have hired a consultant to build a case for an inland container stuffing facility that would convert the province's bulk product shipments into containers. The proposed operations would mirror an inland port operational in Kansas City, Missouri, that serves the container port at Long Beach, California.

"We've been supportive of the Kamloops initiative and we are prepared to enter into discussions with Saskatchewan, but at this point we haven't entertained the notion of a direct investment," said Xotta. "So I think before we get to inland terminals, we will be continuing to work with key partners to continue to grow our volumes through existing facilities."

But he did not dismiss the role inland ports could play in the port's future.

"I'm anxious to see the specific value proposition that is defined in Saskatchewan and Kamloops, and we will endeavour to find ways to support that, if it is good for the Port of Vancouver," he said.

Another way of alleviating port congestion and increasing B.C.'s market share of Asia-Pacific trade could come in the form of building a new port facility altogether, according to Steve Dunton, CEO of

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Columbia National Investments Ltd.

The company has proposed building an international ocean port at McNabb Valley on the Sunshine Coast. The 803-acre site is approximately five kilometres up Howe Sound from Port Mellon, and features 1.5 kilometres of deep-water frontage and large gravel reserves.

Dunton estimates the proposed facility could cost in excess of \$500 million and may be a container terminal, or a bulk terminal, or both. While Dunton acknowledges transportation infrastructure over challenging terrain remains an issue, he indicated it was a provincial government official who suggested the potential use of the property as a port site.

He also indicated the financing was available to proceed with the port proposal.

"We've had lots of discussions with a few majors in the port facilities business. The province sees us, I believe, as a real gain and so does the federal government," he said.

"It's an expensive port facility. It's going to require quite a bit of infrastructure to be brought into it that is not there now. But it is probably the right thing to do with this land."

A land link from the Sunshine Coast to Squamish would be needed in order to accommodate continued future growth in Vancouver and the Lower Mainland, he said.

"That is going to require connectivity, and while we connect it, it is easy to connect into the McNabb Valley at the same time."

Dunton is unsure how long it might take to make the proposal a reality.

"I really can't tell you how long it would take. I know the financing is available to us to do anything we want to do on it. I'm pretty sure the approvals will be available to us. This has a lot of good synergies.... I honestly believe that this could move fairly fast."

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