

Memphis Takes Additional Step as Nexus Of Transportation and Commerce

ANDY MEEK | *The Daily News*
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The River of Trade Corridor Coalition, a partnership of more than 225 members spread out over nine states and dedicated to the promotion of commerce, selected Memphis as the site of its major quarterly meeting, which convenes today.

Beginning with a tour of Memphis and Crittenden County transportation sites - possibly including the FedEx hub, for example - members of the group, various dignitaries and transportation officials will then gather at Mid-South Community College in West Memphis.

The quarterly meeting, which officially began yesterday with an evening gathering and dinner reception at Memphis Marriott Downtown, will include everything from an update for group members about internal housekeeping items to presentations on trade and transportation issues affecting the wider Memphis area.

The guest list for today's lunchtime presentation includes Tennessee Sen. Mark Norris; Jim Ray, chief counsel for the Federal Highway Administration; and Dave Huneryager, president and CEO of the Tennessee Trucking Association.

"We move these meetings throughout the corridor to show the members' different regional aspects with regard to trade and transportation," said ROTCC spokeswoman Jean Sides. "This has been identified as a primary trade route by the Federal Highway Administration, and so we are working on building up membership throughout the entire corridor, which is one reason for the quarterly meetings."

Regional, national agenda

Memphis has long been touted as "America's distribution center," with its multi-modal transportation and distribution matrix and with its geographic setting.



CLEARED FOR TAKEOFF: The FedEx main hub in Memphis houses hundreds of aircraft to meet the company's daily flight demands to points all across the world. It also could be one of several stops for transportation officials meeting in Memphis today for the River of Trade Corridor Coalition quarterly meeting. -- PHOTO COURTESY OF FEDEX CORP.

The agenda is broad, with speakers covering issues ranging across the nine-state corridor. Ray, the keynote speaker at today's event, will discuss a national strategy to reduce congestion.

Regional guests, including Norris and Dexter Muller, senior vice president of community development with the Memphis Regional Chamber, will give overviews of local trade and transportation assets. Muller has been quite involved in the Regional Logistics Council, as well.

Another topic sure to be of particular interest in the Memphis area is the planned expansion of the Panama Canal, an overview of which will be provided by Adsinar Cajar, the consul general of Panama.

"The group is not unlike the I-69 coalition, in that it basically lobbies for improvements in this corridor," said Muller of the ROTCC's designated area, which stretches from ports in California, across several Southern states - including Tennessee - and onward north into Detroit.

Memphis, front and center

Coincidentally, today's large-scale, transportation-oriented meeting comes almost two weeks after another similar gathering of transportation heavyweights in Memphis. Earlier this month, newly confirmed U.S. Secretary of Transportation Mary Peters convened hearings in the city to get a close-up look at trade and commerce in Memphis, part of a tour of transportation hubs nationwide.

The group she chairs, the National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission, met in six cities over the course of several weeks to chart U.S. transportation policy for at least the next decade. Among issues that the group reviewed in Memphis is the due diligence-type study of whether to construct a new four-lane bridge over the Mississippi River.

Meanwhile, the River of Trade Corridor Coalition - created in the fall of 2004 - is focused on a lofty mission: promoting commerce and existing trade corridors, with a special emphasis on reducing congestion and preserving the environment.

The agenda for the ROTCC meeting in Memphis includes a look at state, regional and national transportation issues. Public officials and representatives from businesses along the trade corridor have been invited to attend, which also will entail touring and talking about bridges, ports and other local assets in Memphis.

"We're also working with the (Memphis Regional) Chamber to get a tour of FedEx, as well as the regional assets in Arkansas and Tennessee," Sides said.

From Panama, with love

One item that's also of particular interest locally is the ramification associated with expanding the Panama Canal - a potential boost for transportation, even in Memphis. Last month, about 80 percent of voters in Panama approved a national referendum to expand the canal, which serves as a crucial link in delivering goods to the United States.

Traffic through the canal currently is increasing at such a rate that soon freight there could be mired in gridlock.

"Part of it is you've got so much coming in from Asia," Muller said. "That's coming through, really,

one primary port now, which is in Long Beach, Calif. So if you have congestion at that port, you're not getting the goods into the country. But if they came through and expanded the Panama Canal, they could bypass Long Beach."

According to the Journal of Commerce trade publication, the canal expansion also will serve to allow not only more traffic, but also ships that are more than three times the size of those that currently traverse the area now.

Martha Lott, administrator of the Memphis Metropolitan Planning Organization, said the proposed canal expansion project has a direct connection to Memphis because of the sheer amount of freight moved through the canal into the United States.

Ecological Quotient

Also today, Scott Davis, chief of the air quality modeling and transportation section of the EPA, will be on hand to discuss national efforts to establish "green and clean" transportation corridors. He's affiliated with a new group, the Southeast Diesel Collaborative, through which he'll be promoting clean fuel and other conservation issues at the meeting.

"One of the things we seem to have a common interest in is the idea of having green corridors, which are areas along interstates where there are facilities available for the use of biofuels," he said. "And they're also for the use of equipment that reduces the idling of diesel trucks when they're not in service."

Co-hosts of today's ROTCC meeting include Memphis Mayor Willie Herenton, the Memphis Regional Chamber and Crittenden County officials Judge Melton Holt and Justice Velmar Bailey.