



FILLING A VOID

Is it time for a Great Lakes Regional Port Authority?

In June, 2013, Great Lakes governors announced the creation of a regional maritime initiative and established a task force to develop specific recommendations. After a year of study and deliberation, the task force has proposed a number of actions, including the creation of a “regional maritime entity.”

What’s a regional maritime entity? Good question. The task force isn’t quite sure either and will be holding meetings in coming months to develop this concept further. By putting this idea on the table, the task force raises an interesting question. Would a multi-state “super-agency” be a valuable tool for solving problems, stimulating maritime commerce and promoting regional economic growth?

I think it would.

At the local level, Great Lakes port authorities already play this role. Whether a division of state or local government or a free-standing agency created by state statute, Great Lakes ports exercise a variety of powers to enhance maritime commerce and economic development in their communities. These activities include planning, marketing, industrial development, environmental restoration, development financing, brown-field redevelopment, etc. While these community-based efforts are critical, there is a void at the regional level. A Great Lakes Regional Port Authority (GLRPA) could supplement local ports and serve an important role addressing larger, regional challenges.

A regional approach to Great Lakes system planning has already been embraced by Congress. The Water Resources Reform and Development Act (WRRDA) directs the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to manage the Great Lakes as a single, interdependent navigation system. While this directive is limited to the activities of the Corps, the same kind of systemic approach should be adopted as we tackle economic develop-

ment questions. Unfortunately, there is no current structure under which to do so.

Precedent for regional transportation and economic development agencies exist throughout the United States. Best known, the bi-state Port Authority of New York & New Jersey was created in 1921 to plan for the development of transportation facilities in the New York City metropolitan area. The Tennessee Valley Authority was created in 1933 to provide electricity, navigation and economic development for a seven-state area. In 1965, Congress established the Appalachian Regional Commission to focus on transportation and environmental enhancement projects in an 11-state area. Created in 2000, the Delta Regional Authority was authorized by Congress to enhance economic development, improve transportation infrastructure and support job creation in an eight-state area along the lower Mississippi River.

Similar to these agencies, a GLRPA would need to be authorized by both the state governments and Congress. State financial support should be matched with federal funds and the agency should be empowered with financing capabilities to support regional development. The agency should be authorized to generate revenue from its own development and finance activities and redirect those revenues into its operations, expansion and future projects.

The nexus between this new regional entity and the federal government is important. The St. Lawrence Seaway Development Corporation (SLSDC) can play a key role. The agency has an exclusive Great Lakes system focus and already has a trade development mission. Federal matching funds could flow through the agency and oversight of those funds could be vested in the SLSDC. The agency’s own development finance capabilities should be expanded (through legislation) to empower the agency

to support regional transportation and economic development projects.

Standing up a new regional maritime entity will be difficult to say the least. For that reason, the process and players are key. Great Lakes Governors have already appointed a task force to develop this concept. The task force is largely comprised of state agency staff. Should the task force recommend moving forward, the governors should then appoint a multi-state commission of high-level private and public sector leaders to carry the project forward. The commission should evaluate existing regional development models, explore governance structures, determine legal and legislative requirements, propose financing options, establish geographic boundaries and define agency activities and mission. The commission should engage stakeholders and solicit public input. Should the commission’s report recommend moving forward, it should lay out a clear strategic plan for standing up the GLRPA and identify key milestones and a timeline for action.

Great Lakes governors should be commended for initiating this discussion. While regional environmental protection efforts have been critically important over the last four decades, they have dominated regional institutions and dialogue. Governors, mayors and other regional leaders are equally concerned about economic development and jobs. The Great Lakes region is an integrated economic area. It is appropriate that a regional approach to maritime commerce and economic development be pursued. ■

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