



## Port Authority must improve rail system, officials say

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By **Leslie Kwoh/The Star-Ledger**



Tony Kurdzuk/The Star-Ledger

File photo of the Conrail freight line.

Improving the rail network around the region's container port terminals is key to capitalizing on an anticipated doubling of cargo shipments over the next decade, Port Authority of New York and New Jersey officials said yesterday.

The agency said it plans to improve overall efficiency in the port region by increasing the percentage of rail-transported cargo to 20 percent, from 12 percent, thereby also curbing emissions from the large diesel trucks that currently receive the bulk of goods arriving on container ships.

"Rail is a big part of our future," the authority's director of port commerce, Richard Larrabee, said yesterday, during a forum in Newark with local business leaders. "We've built a lot of infrastructure to increase capacity."

The Port Authority recently began work on a \$600 million ship-to-rail container facility in Jersey City, called the ExpressRail Port Jersey, which will bring the port region's annual rail capacity to 1 million containers, up from 400,000, Larrabee said. There are already similar facilities in Port Elizabeth, Port Newark and Howland Hook Terminal on Staten Island.

Larrabee, who was speaking at a Newark Regional Business Partnership event about the future of the port, also talked about the agency's plan to raise the height of the Bayonne Bridge. The \$1 billion project, announced last month, will raise the bridge's roadbed to 215 feet, allowing newer, larger ships to access the ports of Elizabeth and Newark.

"We're in a very competitive business. Ships have rudders and propellers, and they can easily go to Norfolk and Halifax, or Los Angeles and Long Beach," he said.

The higher bridge will allow shipping companies to use larger ships, thus saving up to 20 percent on their "slot

costs," an industry term to describe the cost of carrying each container, he said.

"Does it induce more business? I don't think so. What it does is allow businesses to more efficiently access our port," he said in an interview after the event.

Shipping officials yesterday repeated their hope the project is finished as soon as possible to take advantage of the Panama Canal widening, which is slated for completion in 2014. However, Larrabee declined to give a construction timetable, saying only that raising the roadbed would take "significantly less time" than other options that require eight to 12 years.

He added that the decision to raise the roadbed closely resembles one of the options from a 2009 report by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in terms of cost, time frame and benefits. That option, which recommends raising the entire steel structure, lists a completion date of 2019, break-even date of 2033 and "total net benefit" of \$3.3 billion.

The improvements were welcomed yesterday by industry representatives, who said they will help bring jobs to the region and keep prices of goods low for consumers.

Joseph Curto, president of the New York Shipping Association, said the next step is to increase marketing efforts to attract more warehouses and distribution centers to the region. Others discussed the idea of better utilizing waterfront space by building multi-level warehouses that some European port cities have already adopted. The added space will help the region's importers and exporters serve a growing demand for goods like automobiles, steel, paper, grain, soy beans, corn and whey, they said.

But some also questioned the apparent lack of details in the Bayonne Bridge project. Forum moderator George Kelley, who is also chairman of Langan Engineering and Environmental Services in Elmwood Park, asked Larrabee if the bridge project could turn into another "ARC tunnel" with budget overruns.

"The check has already been cut. The Port Authority has already pledged the money," Larrabee said.

"But is it going to cost more than \$1 billion?" Kelley asked.

Larrabee responded: "It's close."

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