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BUSINESS PULSE SURVEY: Washington — good for business?

Shippers try to dodge I-5 gridlock

Truck Tangle

Puget Sound Business Journal (Seattle) - July 20, 2007 by Steve Wilhelm Staff Writer

If you thought commuters face a hellish August dealing with the planned Interstate-5 closures, just think about truckers pulling 45-foot rigs.

Photo: Marcus R. Donner
Kent Christopher, president of Western Ports Transportation, says lane closures on Interstate 5 near Seattle will create big problems for trucking companies.
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The road repairs will close parts of the freeway in Seattle just at the spot where thousands of 18-wheel trucks get on and off each day to reach the Port of Seattle docks at Harbor Island and south of downtown Seattle.

What's more, the closures come during one of the busiest trucking seasons, when trucks just passing through will also get tangled. And with backups predicted all the way to Tacoma, truckers at the state's other major port will likely be affected, too.

Commuters are being urged to take alternate routes around the roadwork.

But truckers don't have even that option. Because of downtown's steep hills and sharp corners, large tractor-trailers won't be able to use the downtown entrance ramps that cars can. Instead they will have to inch through the narrowed portion of I-5, or seek alternate routes that city and state planners are trying to develop.

"A truck pulling a 45-foot container -- we don't blend in with street traffic like a station wagon," said Kent Christopher, president of Western Ports Transportation Inc. in Seattle.

Some downtown roads are too steep even for trucks towing shorter, 20-foot containers.

Leaders of the region's freight-moving companies are scratching their heads and strategizing about how to get trucks through the gridlock, which is expected to run from before the morning rush until nearly midnight.

The roadwork affects only one mile of I-5, which is being repaired and repaved from Aug. 10-29. The project will replace 34 aging expansion joints on the northbound lanes of I-5 and then repave that side of the freeway. Expansion joints in the southbound lanes will be just be repaired, without repaving. During the work, on a section from Spokane Street to the Interstate 90 interchange, five lanes in either direction will narrow to as few as two.

Truck operators are weighing a variety of tactics to keep trucks rolling, including operating during off-hours, adding a congestion surcharge, and asking customers to defer certain shipments until the work is complete.

"There's going to be quite a bit of thought put into this. It's a little bit like water, it will find the path of least resistance," said Peter Whitehead, president of Nelson Trucking Co. Inc., who is co-chair of Seattle's freight mobility committee.

Truckers also are seeking different routes, such as diverting to Interstate 405 to the east for long-haul truckers driving through Seattle. Other options will include seeking alternatives through Seattle's surface streets.

But to a large extent, truckers aren't sure what to expect, despite the preparation efforts of the state and city of Seattle departments of transportation.

A key limitation will be the fact that drivers are already in short supply, and federal law limits the hours drivers can operate. Some drivers who currently do three round trips a day, may be limited by traffic to just one or two, said Dan Gatchet, president of West Coast Trucking Inc.

"We don't have more trucks and drivers," he said. "For international (cargo), this is peak season. Freight won't be delivered on as timely a basis as we want it to be."

To help, the state Department of Transportation is using a $100,000 grant to adjust traffic signals on key north-south surface streets near the port to improve traffic flow for vehicles that divert there from I-5. These include First and Fourth avenues, as well as Airport Way, East Marginal

Way, Rainier Avenue and Martin Luther King Jr. Way, said state Department of Transportation Project Engineer Bruce Nebbitt.

New signs also will be installed on the northbound side of Airport Way, already a major truck route, to restrict one of the lanes to carpools and trucks, Nebbitt said.

"I expect a lot of people will get off I-5 at Boeing Access, and come up Airport Way there," he said.

Another adjustment: The U.S. Coast Guard will extend for about two hours, morning and evening, the period that the First Avenue South Bridge will not be opened for river traffic, Nebbitt said.

City and state officials have been meeting with business leaders since late in 2006, encouraging them to do everything they can to reduce truck traffic, including encouraging employees to vanpool, telecommute or go on vacation.

But late summer is a peak period for several big cargoes, including seafood from Alaska, as well as the beginning of holiday imports.

"You not only have salmon out of Bristol Bay and Southeast Alaska, but pollock and bottom fish from Dutch Harbor," said Dave Carey, receiving manager for the Northland Services Inc.

Mark Anderson, president and CEO of Anderson Hay and Grain Co. Inc. in Ellensburg, said his company will try to minimizing truckers' driving in the Puget Sound area.

The company delivers containers full of hay to be loaded aboard ships at the ports of Seattle and Tacoma. A goal will be to pick up empty containers at the port where drivers drop off, rather than being forced to drive to the other port to get an empty.

Christopher, of Western Ports Transportation, said his company will be trying to get cargo that's unloaded from ships in Tacoma, or barges along the Duwamish Waterway, to customers north of Seattle in Mount Vernon or Blaine.

"A container destined to Blaine" Wash., he said. "That's when we could have a very large problem."

Christopher said he hopes the early publicity will persuade enough drivers to stay off the roads so the situation won't become a nightmare.

"Hopefully the contractor with his incentives will be able to get the project done, and like Y2K you plan a lot of bad scenarios, and after the end of August we laugh and say, 'We dodged the bullet on that,'" he said.

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