

September 09, 2005

Barge plans need work, Port Authority decides

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A plan to reduce barge-shipping costs needs more details before it can receive state money, West Virginia Public Port Authority board members decided Thursday.

Paul Wilkinson made the motion to table a proposal for the agency to enter into an agreement with Marshall University's Rahall Transportation Institute and the University of Tennessee's Center for Transportation Research until the board's next meeting in November. Board member Eric Peters said he wants to see which projects are feasible and also the current and potential flow of commodities through the state.

The proposal called for the port authority to give up to \$100,000 (almost a quarter of the agency's yearly budget) so researchers could complete a master plan. The plan will look at ways the thousands of West Virginia businesses that ship their products can reduce their costs to become more competitive with other states.

The plan will examine sharing assets, consolidating shipments and negotiating as a group, instead of as individual businesses. The plan could also serve as a one-stop shop for transportation information.

"The louder the voice, the more people listen," said Mark Burton, the director of transportation economics at the University of Tennessee's Center for Transportation Research and research professor at Marshall University's Center for Business and Economic Research.

The plan also calls for the creation of West Virginia Ports Inc., a statewide organization whose workers could share assets like information technology, labor or equipment among the state's nearly 1,000 river terminals. The group could also allow shippers to band together to buy items like fuel and insurance.

Burton sees publicly owned terminals, privately owned general commodity ports and commodity-specific terminals, and individual shippers possibly participating in the program.

"It wouldn't take away from shippers' autonomy," he told board members.

Burton and Patrick Donovan, the port authority's acting executive director, still need to work out details like who would run West Virginia Ports Inc. and the group's funding sources. They're looking at several states like Virginia, Indiana and Tennessee as models. The organization would eventually be self-sustaining and hopefully make money for the port authority, Burton said.

Within nine months to a year, the duo hopes to deliver a set of cost-saving activities to board members that are ready to put into place.

"People have said, 'gosh, I like that idea,' but no one has been willing to make it happen," said Burton, who has studied freight transportation in West Virginia for several years. "This is doing something. We want to move from recommendation to implementation."

Board members were also supposed to hire the port authority's executive director Thursday, but did not. In July, search committee members said they were going to interview the four best candidates and recommend one to hire someone at Thursday's meeting. Members haven't interviewed applicants yet.

Donovan has been the acting director since Bill Jackson retired in December. The group received 42 applications from people from West Virginia, Pittsburgh and Cincinnati, and had narrowed the list to 10, board member Mike Bright said at the July meeting. The director will earn about \$65,000 a year.

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