



- HOME
- NEWS
- FEATURES
- COMMENTARY
- PUBLIC NOTICES
- PROJECT CENTER
- EVENTS
- BBC
- LAW

Monday, October 15, 2012 11:20 AM
HOME > NEWS > PREMIUM BUILDING AND CONSTRUCTION > PORT OF VANCOUVER IN THE THICK OF CONSTRUCTION

• Adv

Port of Vancouver in the thick of construction

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Crews with Hamilton Construction build a trench at the Port of Vancouver that will ease rail congestion by allowing trains entering the port to pass under the Columbia River Rail Bridge. (Photo by Sam Tenney/DJC)

Curtis Shuck, the director of economic development and facilities for the Port of Vancouver USA, pulled his SUV into a dirt field and pointed out the window.

“This here is the view that you’re getting to see for the first time in literally over 100 years,” he said.

He gestured toward a small dirt road that ran beneath a new train overpass. It doesn’t look like much now, he explained, but it will eventually connect downtown Vancouver, Wash., to the waterfront via Esther Street and open the doors to a \$1.5 billion development project that **Gramor Development** is planning to begin in 2014.

Until recently, the railroad for a century had separated the city from its waterfront, and BNSF Railway Co. had been unwilling to sell the rights to the heavily trafficked rail. But then the port proposed to move the line as part of its West Vancouver Freight Access project - a \$275 million effort featuring 21 separate projects to expand rail capacity from 16 linear miles of track to more than 45.

The Esther Street project freed up the land and let Gramor purchase the waterfront property, which Shuck said will someday look like Portland’s South Waterfront District. Crews finished that project in 2009, but the port has \$60.5 million worth of work under way. And this week bidding will open for an \$11.75 million project to expand the port’s business park by 58 acres; it’s expected to attract \$100 million in private-sector investment.

Shuck drove over railroad tracks to a section of waterfront where construction crews are extending tracks beneath the existing BNSF mainline bridge. The \$35 million new port rail access project received approximately \$15 million in federal money because it will ultimately alleviate congestion on the mainline track.

The project - number 16 on a list of 21 - requires crews to build a new track 24.5 feet below the BNSF mainline bridge. That puts it seven feet below the high water mark of the Columbia River, so Hamilton Construction is building a sea wall to keep the water at bay.

“It’s actually going to be a fairly unique structure - one that you don’t see very often at all,” Shuck said. “In fact, this is really the first of its kind. So we call it the seventh wonder of the world, and affectionately refer to it as the ‘Trench.’ ”



Piles along the Columbia River at the Port of Vancouver are being installed to support a trench allowing trains to pass under a bridge spanning the river. The work is part of the port’s 10-year, \$275 million West Vancouver Freight Access project. (Photo by Sam Tenney/DJC)

The port operates on approximately 800 acres and has 600 more available. It has more than 50 tenants; 75 percent of their business comes by rail.

While the Port of Portland focuses on container shipments, the Port of Vancouver specializes in bulk products. For instance, it annually ships abroad more than half a million metric tons of scrap metal and as much as 4 million metric tons of grain - approximately 16 percent of the nation’s total wheat export.

Shuck maneuvered the SUV down a corridor bordered by mountains of scrap metal to the left and towering grain elevators to the right. A big challenge for the WVFA project has been acquisition of necessary rights of way. Next spring, the port will weave its rail line through an \$85 million expansion that United Grain Corp. will complete this year. Also, several buildings in the way will be demolished.

“This is a grain elevator expansion in front of us and our rail line comes right through this building here too and then connects to this main rail yard. So we tried to hit just about every building we could,” he said in jest.

Shuck added that a mining company called BHP Billiton is preparing to convert a 164-acre port property into a \$200 million potash facility.

Meanwhile, the port’s \$60 million gateway overpass project is about 75 percent complete.

Despite all that work to improve its infrastructure, the port is at 99 percent occupancy and Shuck said it is turning companies away. The port hopes to change that via development of its Centennial Industrial Park.

In phase one, 58 acres will be subdivided into seven shovel-ready lots able to hold approximately 550,000 square feet of office, manufacturing, production and warehouse space. The port recently received \$5.75 million for that work through the Jobs Now Act, which was passed by the state Legislature earlier this year. Approximately 500 family-wage jobs could be created through the project, according to the port.

Shuck has been working on the WVFA project since 2005. As he drove back into the port's administrative office parking lot, he explained that simply securing permits required years of effort. The port now has the green light until 2027. There is still a long way to go, Shuck said, but progress is rewarding.

"We've been planning and engineering and acquiring (rights of way) for all that time," he said. "So it's nice to be starting construction."



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