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Regional planners get up-close look at Will County trucks

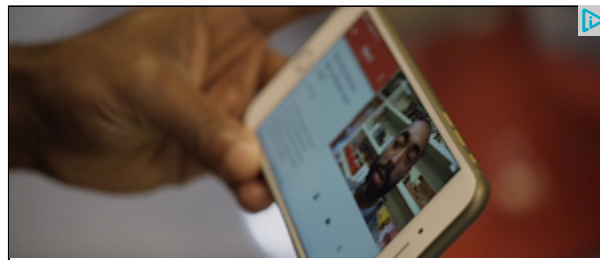
BNSF and Union Pacific offer insights into local operations

By BOB OKON - bokon@shawmedia.com — Published: Saturday, Aug. 20, 2016 10:45 p.m. CDT



A Pace official ties down a cooler of water to a bus Wednesday before several officials from Metra, Pace and Will County took a tour Wednesday of the intermodal yards in Joliet and Elwood. (Eric Ginnard - eginnard@shawmedia.com)

JOLIET – They say everything is big in Texas, but everything in Will County seen by a tour of regional planners last week was pretty big, too.



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The locally organized tour was designed to give planners who have a say on regional highway planning a look at the growth – especially in numbers of trucks hitting the roads – in the area.

“Welcome to Will County,” Will County Executive Larry Walsh said Wednesday to some 50 people about to board a Pace bus in downtown Joliet to see the industrial development to the south. “You’re going to get a firsthand, bird’s-eye view of about what we’ve been talking about is happening in Joliet.”

The group visited the intermodal yards in Joliet and Elwood, the two facilities that make Will County the nation’s largest inland port handling containers moved by ships, trains and trucks.

They saw the 1.4 million-square-foot Ikea distribution center under construction, and the [two Amazon fulfillment centers](#) that will employ 3,500 workers once the second facility is completed this fall.

But on that Wednesday morning, one thing the tour did not see was much congestion on Route 52 and Laraway Road – two areas where traffic can be at its worst but was not at that time.

Kelwin Harris, a senior outreach planner with the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), even commented at the end of the tour how efficiently everything seemed to run.

“It was very impressive, too, how low it was in terms of impact on traffic and noise. It was extremely efficient,” Harris said. “I think it was extremely well-planned.”

Efficiency was emphasized at both intermodal yards in Joliet and Elwood.

Union Pacific intermodal

“It takes about a minute to come in and less than a minute to go out,” Bob Zelinski, director of intermodal operations, told the group at Union Pacific’s Joliet Intermodal Yard as he described the automated gate system.

Truck drivers pass through the system with their drivers' licenses and fingerprints being read.

"If you want to steal a box out of here, you have look like the guy on the driver's license and cut off one of his fingers," Zelinski said. "Security is pretty good around here."

The Joliet Intermodal Yard is Union Pacific's biggest intermodal operation in the Chicago region, said Adrian Guerrero, director of public affairs.

The facility handles more than 1 million railroad cars a year, he said.



he said.

The Joliet Intermodal Yard has room to grow, Guerrero said. It opened in 2010 and 550 acres are developed with another 400 acres available to expand operations.

BNSF expansion

Logistics Park Chicago, the BNSF facility in Elwood, is even busier.

BNSF does 1 million lifts a year at its 680-acre facility in Elwood, and is in the process of equipping itself to expand to 1.5 million, said Andy Williams, director of public affairs.

BNSF is adding six wide-span cranes, which will allow the facility to handle more cargo than it does now with conventional stacking cranes.

"Most of our containers brought to us here have consumer products," Williams told the group. "One of our biggest customers is Wal-Mart, which is just up the street."

Wal-Mart has a sprawling distribution center in CenterPoint Intermodal Center-Elwood.

Logistics Park Chicago has eight out-gates and 16 in-gates, also equipped with automated technology.

"I challenge you to find a facility with that many in-gates," Williams said. "We take pride in that it takes a minute and a half on average to get through that in-gate."

Highways and Pace buses

While the intermodal yards may be operating efficiently, the message from local officials to those on the bus tour is that things are not moving so smoothly on the outside.

[Widening Interstate 80 and modernizing the interchanges](#), especially at Route 53, are two major priorities, said John Greuling, chief executive officer at the Will County Center for Economic Development.

The landscape and local economy was very different from when I-80 was first built through the region, Greuling told the group as the bus rolled down Route 53.

“I-80 was a rural interstate, and the interchanges were designed for rural traffic, not the tens of thousands of tractor-trailers that go through the intermodal yards on a daily basis,” Greuling said.

The intermodal yards also were built in once rural areas.

Now, Pace has two bus routes to bring workers from Joliet to the intermodal yards and surrounding industrial parks.

“We do have additional routes to Joliet,” Pace Associate Planner Ezekial Guza said.



another local route to serve the future Mars candy distribution center, which will include 700 employees and a 350,000-square-foot chocolate cooler when it opens.

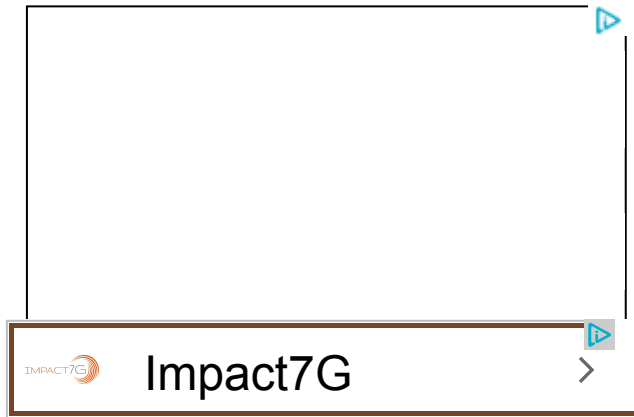
The impact of it all was not lost on the visitors on the bus.

Stephen Ostrander, also a senior planner with CMAP, said he has been on Route 53 in Joliet when it was lined with trucks, so he knows the road is not always as open as it was Wednesday.

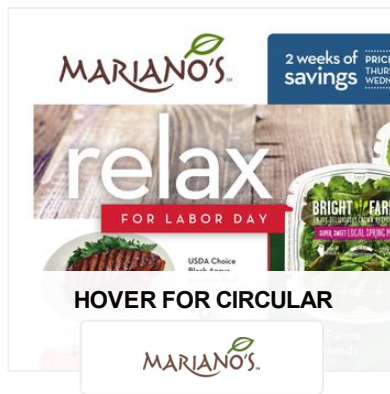
Seeing the intermodal yards up close “was a very good experience for us” and will be useful in long-term planning, Ostrander said.

“I think it’s helpful for people in other areas to see the amazing things that are happening here,” he said. “People hear about it. But for anybody their first time here, it’s pretty amazing.”

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