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Joliet seeks to become the O'Hare of the train-truck world

Trains full of consumer goods will roll into Joliet's new CenterPoint Intermodal and transfer their loads to trucks for deliveries, making Will County a major port for consumer goods coming in and out of the Midwest

By Mary Owen, TribLocal reporter

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Joliet's new CenterPoint Intermodal opened this week, a milestone for a project that will make Will County a major port for consumer goods coming in and out of the Midwest.

"Nothing like this exists in the world," said Neil Doyle, CenterPoint executive vice president. "The significance both now and in the future really cements Chicago and the Midwest as the freight capital of North America. It's a real boost for the area."

Trains carrying goods — including clothing, sports equipment and electronics — from Texas, California and the Pacific Rim along the Union Pacific railroad will be delivered to CenterPoint, where trucks will transport them across the Midwest.

The \$2 billion facility on Joliet's south side, combined with an expanding CenterPoint facility in nearby Elwood, will be the largest inland port in the country, officials said. As the largest construction project in Will County, it has created about 1,000 construction jobs. It also is expected to generate as many as 10,000 more jobs over the next several years.

"At a time when we are a shadow of our former self (financially), this is a good thing," said Jim Haller, Joliet's director of Community and Economic Development. The project has infused \$800,000 into the city's coffers for building permit and connection fees.

A third CenterPoint facility is planned for Crete.

CenterPoint in Joliet is on about 4,000 acres south of Laraway Road between Brandon and Patterson roads. About 900 acres are completed on which Union Pacific has built its facility. Other companies, such as Northfield-based chemical maker Stepan Co., plan to build warehouses and distribution centers on the property, which is serviced by the Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroad.

In Elwood, which has been operational for eight years, companies such as Bissell Homecare, Wal-Mart Stores, and paper- and pulpmaker Georgia-Pacific use the facility to move products from train to truck to store. The Elwood site is about 80 percent completed. About 90 giant train containers arrive at the facility each hour.

CenterPoint officials said other companies looking to locate in Joliet will be announced in the next several weeks.

"Just the number of clients we already have looking at the facility is utterly amazing," Mullen said last week. "I think there will still be a low volume of trains for a while and then we will ramp up over the next 30 to 40 days."

The Joliet facility officially opened at 12:01 a.m. Monday with the first train expected to arrive from Long Beach, Calif., said Mark Davis, a spokesman for Union Pacific. That train returned to Long Beach filled with goods.

"It will be kind of like the opening of an airport," Davis said. "It will take time in order to get all the processes and the train schedules moved to the new facility."

Union Pacific has several facilities in the Chicago area, including Dolton, Northlake and Rochelle, which will continue to operate. The company will close its facility on Canal Street in downtown Chicago because it's small and antiquated, Davis said.

U.S. Rep. Debbie Halvorson, D-Ill., said she remembers visiting the site in September when it was an empty field.

"Now the facility is bustling with cargo and people coming in and out," Halvorson said. "This is exciting and is bringing hope to a lot of families in my district."

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