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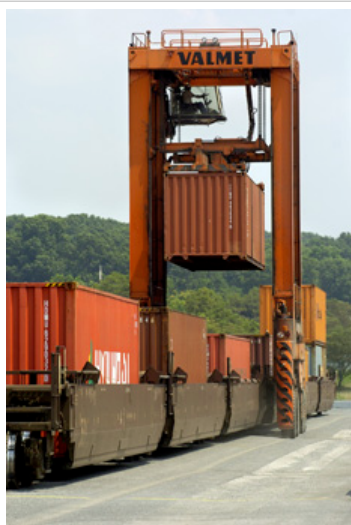
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Blue Ridge port of call

The Virginia Inland Port shows what could await Western Virginia.

By [Angela Manese-Lee](#), 381-8621

Alan Kim | The Roanoke Times

At the Virginia Inland Port intermodal transfer facility, a straddle carrier loads containers onto deep-well rail cars. After traveling to Norfolk, the containers are loaded into container ships headed overseas.

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Panoramic photos



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[The Inland Port in Front Royal, Va. where a straddle carrier prepares to lower cargo container onto trailer chassis.](#)

[The cargo cannisters are loaded on deep-well railcars, ready to roll to Norfolk, Va.](#)

[Straddle carriers rest on the tarmac of the Virginia Inland Port.](#)

By the numbers

The Virginia Inland Port

- 40,000** Number of cargo containers the inland port expects to handle this year
- 75 to 100** Average number of cargo containers the inland port handles each day
- 500** Number of containers the inland port has the capacity to handle each day
- 2:1** Ratio of imports to exports that the inland port deals with
- 17** Total number of Virginia Inland Port employees
- 67,000** Maximum weight, in pounds, of a container and cargo
- 6** Miles from Interstate 81

FRONT ROYAL -- Two bridges north of this small town, a blue-and-white sign alerts the attentive driver of the presence of the Virginia Inland Port.

Beyond this sign, there is little hint at what lies just off U.S. 340/522.

But pull off the four-lane highway and onto the 52 paved acres that make up the inland port and there is little mystery about what happens here.

On a recent afternoon in July, a pair of port employees assemble a line of cargo, two containers high and dozens of containers long.

In a couple of hours, the containers will be en route to Norfolk. Hooked to a Norfolk Southern locomotive, they will trace the return arc in a supply cycle that each day rotates through Warren County.

A similar cycle may soon travel through Montgomery County.

Last month, Montgomery County officials confirmed Norfolk Southern has chosen 62 acres there as its "preferred site" for the company's \$18 million intermodal shipping yard. Intermodal shipping puts goods in containers that can be transferred among trains, ships and trucks.

In the weeks since Montgomery County's announcement, railroad representatives have met with several Elliston residents to discuss purchasing property for the facility.

And to get an idea of what the region may be in for, a group of county leaders last month took a trip to Front Royal and the 17-year-old intermodal facility that operates just outside town limits.

From farm to transit

Like Norfolk Southern's "preferred site" in Elliston, the land north of Front Royal used to be farmland.

Twenty years ago, a drive up 340/522 would take people through an area of Warren County so rural "you could ride through here and basically see nothing here," recalled longtime resident Alan Wimer. "DuPont was the only industry here."

Local officials figured that wouldn't be the case for long.

The land that now makes up Warren County's industrial corridor is not only bordered by railroad tracks, it's located on a four-lane road and within a few miles of Interstates 66 and 81.

"Common sense would say that it was destined to be developed at some point," said Front Royal Mayor James Eastham.

While perhaps inevitable, corridor development was hurried by the Virginia Port Authority's decision to build an inland port on 161 acres of farmland.

Opened in 1989, the inland port allows the port authority to send cargo between its marine terminals and inland customers via rail, thereby capturing cargo from the Ohio Valley region that previously was trucked to Baltimore and shipped from there.

From January through July, the inland port handled 18,979 containers, and executives said they expect to move 40,000 containers this year. Those containers travel directly between the Hampton Roads area and the Virginia Inland Port five days a week on a train assigned to that purpose.

Economic development

From the beginning, Warren County residents saw the inland port as more than just a transfer facility.

The same year the Virginia Inland Port opened, Front Royal's largest employer, Avtex Fibers, shut down, laying off hundreds.

2 Miles from Interstate 66
 24 Number of companies the inland port helped to attract
More than 7,000 Number of people employed by companies the inland port helped to attract
\$600 million Amount of money invested by companies the inland port helped to attract

The Elliston facility

62 Acres identified as Norfolk Southern's "preferred site"
 1,000 Number of cargo containers the Elliston facility could handle in its first year
 10 to 15 Number of jobs that could be created at the Elliston facility site
\$18 million Expected cost of an intermodal facility in Elliston

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"I think there was some high level of expectation the port would help us, give us that competitive advantage and create jobs in the community," said Warren County Administrator Douglas Stanley.

Employing just 17 people, the inland port could hardly fulfill those expectations on its own. But it could play an important role in regional economic development.

And it did -- slowly.

J. Robert Bray, executive director of the Virginia Port Authority, said the authority began working with local economic development officials in the early '90s to help attract distribution and logistics centers.

In anticipation of the slew of industry that would follow this effort, the Front Royal-Warren County Economic Development Authority purchased hundreds of acres around the Virginia Inland Port to create a swath of industrial land.

"We knew where we were going; we knew that this would be the industrial corridor; we knew that this was where we wanted to place manufacturing and distribution," said Jorie Martin, deputy director of the economic development authority.

Purchased in 1996 and 1997, rezoned for industrial uses and fitted with utilities, the land now holds a variety of businesses, including a \$50 million Toray Plastics plant, a \$22 million Ferguson Enterprises facility and a \$50 million Family Dollar center.

Even now, more than 60 percent of the county's industrial land sits between 340/522 and the railroad tracks.

Stanley estimates the 1,250-acre corridor is at 50 percent to 75 percent buildout.

"The port certainly has been a tremendous asset in creating Front Royal as a hub for manufacturing and distribution," said Martin as she looked at an aerial map of the corridor.

So tremendous, in fact, that Warren County is now looking to diversify.

"We're trying to branch off into some different areas and sell the community in different ways," Stanley said. "We're not trying to bill ourselves as the warehouse and distribution mecca of the United States."

As Warren County's industrial corridor has filled, businesses looking to operate near the inland port have turned to outlying communities.

James Davis, mid-Atlantic regional manager with the port authority, said the facility currently serves businesses 25 to 30 miles away, but cargo could eventually come from distribution centers up to 100 miles away.

"As land gets harder and harder to come by within that 25 to 30 miles," Davis said, "they'll look farther and farther."

A list of port-related companies compiled by the Virginia Port Authority between 1998 and 2005 notes 33 companies -- 25 of which are outside Front Royal and Warren County.

Lessons to be learned

From the beginning, the Virginia Inland Port has been held up as an example of the kind of facility that could open in Elliston.

But while Montgomery County Economic Development Director Bob Isner said layout and operations will be similar, there are several differences.

The Elliston facility would be operated by Norfolk Southern as part of the federal Heartland Corridor plan, which aims to increase tunnel clearances so containers can be double-stacked on rail cars running from Columbus, Ohio, to Norfolk.

And unlike at the inland port, the Elliston facility would not be served by a dedicated train -- at least, not initially.

Instead, trains already traveling between Norfolk and the Midwest would stop and either add or remove cargo containers in Elliston.

"We don't expect a lot of shipments from Elliston going west," Isner said. "I think the main objective is to collect containers that are headed for the port, bring them to Elliston, put them on the train and take them to the port and then receive containers destined for this part of the country coming from the port."

Isner said Norfolk Southern is estimating about 1,000 units a year would come through Elliston in the facility's first year.

That number could grow substantially over time. According to a multi-year funding agreement between Norfolk Southern and the state, the facility would handle at least 15,000 units in its 15th year.

Bray, with the port authority, said he expects the Elliston facility to ramp up much more quickly than the Virginia Inland Port.

"With the Heartland Corridor, it's going to be a whole new level of service to this port [Port of Virginia] as well as throughout the commonwealth," Bray said.

"And you have, over the years, a huge growth in distribution centers in Virginia, so we here in Virginia have all the cards to play to make that facility in the

Roanoke area very, very successful in attracting distribution centers."

Frederick County Administrator John Riley Jr. agreed.

"If you don't have a distribution niche in that community down there now, it's going to make that an easier thing to sell," Riley said.

"There are tons of distribution facilities that are looking up and down the interstate corridors to locate."

Riley knows this firsthand.

Frederick County is home to several distribution centers, including a 750,000-square-foot Home Depot center that in 2003 brought \$25 million and 125 jobs to the county.

The economic reach of an intermodal facility has played a prominent role in Montgomery County's announcements.

Last month, Aric Bopp, executive director of the New River Valley Economic Development Alliance, said it would be "excellent" if the region could capture even a fraction of the almost \$600 million in investments the Virginia Port Authority credits the inland port with helping to bring.

And Isner is already eyeing where in the region distribution centers could go.

Because of topography, Elliston and Shawsville are unlikely to see significant industrial development, he explained, but there is available acreage in the Falling Branch and Christiansburg industrial parks.

Outside Montgomery County, Isner pointed to Pulaski County, Salem and Roanoke County.

"On a regional basis, that's what we hope will happen: a backfill of some of the existing industrial sites that are already in the region and that will be the major focus of the marketing effort," he said.

For advice on both economic development and community effects, Montgomery County is likely to turn repeatedly to Warren County.

After returning from his visit to the inland port, Isner called the facility a "low-impact operation."

"If I had to pick up on something I didn't like," he added, "I'd have a hard time finding it."
