The Evolving Role of Rural River Ports as Strategic Economic Development Actors

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Abstract
The mission of seaports and river ports have evolved, over time, reflecting greater consideration
of economic development. This changing role has been examined through analyzing port
authorities in metropolitan regions as they diversify into urban development, but research on the
changing role of rural river ports is nascent. Based on a project funded by the Mississippi
Department of Transportation, this article explores the sixteen public ports in the rural U.S. State
of Mississippi to shed light on how rural port authorities can operationally better support
economic development efforts. These public agencies, which have traditionally focused on
moving non-containerized cargo, are now diversifying into economic development. To be
successful at improving rural livelihoods, rural ports need to work closely with the economic
development community, but in different ways than urban ports. Their governance, financing,
marketing, planning, and collaborative efforts need to adapt to be successful.

Keywords: Rural development, inland waterways, industrial attraction

1. Ports and economic development
Ports can be a key asset for economic development efforts. Ports help a region create
jobs, increase the tax base, and improve quality of life through facilitating the attraction,
retention, and development of businesses. Traditionally, river port organizations played a
passive role in recruiting and retaining industry, but due to external forces, these ports are
becoming active partners in the economic development process. However, how river ports can
more effectively support economic development efforts is not well understood.

River ports are typically examined from a transportation perspective because they have
not been strategic actors in economic development. Instead, this research examines ports through
a lens of asset-based economic development, which is a “bottom-up approach to economic
development that builds on existing local resources to strengthen local and regional economies”
(Reed, 2012 p.1). This is the International Economic Development Council (IEDC)
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