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Chad R. Miller

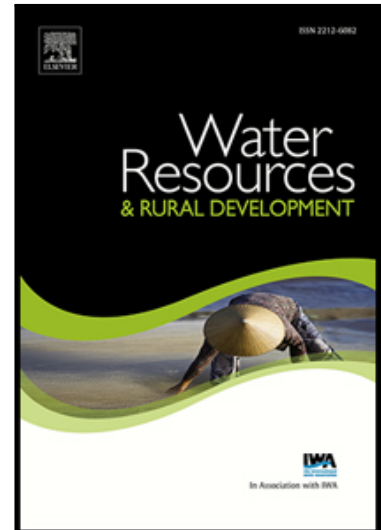
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Chad R. Miller

University of Southern Mississippi

118 College Drive, #5022 Hattiesburg, MS 39406 USA

Chad.r.miller@usm.edu

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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