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Don't sacrifice our maritime economy to poor transportation policy

With billions of dollars at stake from the construction of new commercial fishing boats, Seattle must pay attention to the needs of the freight community, whose access to the city's industrial neighborhoods will be curtailed by the new downtown tunnel, writes guest columnist Peter Philips.

By Peter Philips

Special to The Times



THE commercial fishing industry, which contributes more than \$5 billion a year to Seattle's economy, is on the verge of a historic expansion.

Thanks to high seafood prices, a change in federal law on the construction of new boats and advances in fish-factory design, the fishing fleet homeported in Seattle and plying the Bering Sea and distant waters is embarking on a quarter century of new vessel construction.

These are big, expensive boats. Building them will create hundreds of high-paying jobs, but many of those jobs will not be here unless local government follows policies that accommodate this industry.

New construction already has started. Alaskan Leader Fisheries recently announced a \$25 million new-vessel contract with J.M. Martinac Shipbuilding in Tacoma, enabling the yard to add 50 employees to its workforce over the next year.

Alaska Longline Co. will be building a \$20 million boat of its own. Both Alaska Longline and Alaskan Leader Fisheries have their offices in Seattle, as does LeClerq Marine, currently building one 58-foot limit seiner, with at least two others in the pipeline at about \$3 million each. And Pacific Fishermen Shipyard in Ballard is hard at work converting and expanding boats.

All over the waterfront, welding torches are aflame and lathes are humming. The region's naval architects, engine distributors and other vendors are hiring people and expanding production.

Estimates from industry experts agree that the direct economic benefit of boat building could be in the tens of billions of dollars equally distributed over the next 25 years. However, that the nation's fishing industry is headquartered here is no assurance that the industry will build its boats here. Federal legislation requires only that the boats be built in the United States, and other states see the multibillion-dollar potential.

We do have unique advantages. In addition to Seattle being the homeport of the nation's North Pacific fishing fleet, Puget Sound has deep water, protected harbors and is close to the fishing grounds. We have a 150-year-old maritime tradition that has provided generations of family-wage jobs.

But modern operations rely on freight mobility, a matter to which Seattle's government has been paying little attention.

An average commercial fishing vessel will have 300,000 pounds of steel and a 14,000-pound engine and require 45,000 man-hours to build. A local shipyard will require almost 1,000 truck movements per new vessel, per year, to build that boat. The larger longliners and catcher processors will be exponentially more complex.

The vast majority of the freight necessary to build these boats is manufactured in, and moved between, two industrial neighborhoods: Sodo and Ballard/Interbay.

For 50 years that freight moved efficiently along the Alaskan Way Viaduct.

The downtown tunnel replaces a 140,000-vehicle capacity viaduct with an 80,000-vehicle capacity underground corridor with no connection to industrial Sodo and industrial Ballard/Interbay.

Freight will devolve to Alaskan Way, but I know of no freight representatives on any of the planning committees. The design for the new surface street is woefully lacking in capacity to handle current volumes (about 12,000 vehicles per day), let alone the 40,000 vehicles a tolled tunnel could push onto the roadway.

Mayor Mike McGinn's "road diet" and "traffic calming" initiatives replace remaining freight routes with narrow streets and curb bulbs. To us in the freight community, it seems like an intentional effort to push freight and maritime industrial employers out of the city.

Thousands of well-paid blue-collar jobs can be created here — if policy decisions being made now by our economic development and legislative bodies accommodate the next expansion of our maritime and commercial fishing industry.

Peter Philips is president of the Philips Publishing Group, a 25-year veteran of the commercial maritime community and president of the Seattle Marine Business Coalition.