

Progress in St. Louis quest to become a Gateway to the East

By Editorial Board



Kevin Manning | Post-Dispatch

Guenter Rohrmann is to the air cargo business what Albert Pujols is to baseball — a superstar with a huge price tag, but without whom St. Louis interests would be in deep trouble.

Mr. Rohrmann last month agreed to a \$931,000 consulting deal to persuade manufacturers and air freight companies that St. Louis is good place from which to ship cargo overseas, particularly to China.

The St. Louis region has designated more than 700 acres at three sites around Lambert Airport for expansion of its foreign trade zone. The hope is that the Chinese government will designate St. Louis as its Midwest air cargo hub, shipping goods in here and hauling U.S. goods back.

China's got plenty of goods to ship. The problem is filling the planes so they don't have to deadhaul back to China. So for the past few years, St. Louis business and political leaders have been working (a) to convince China that St. Louis has the airport capacity to handle the cargo and the transportation infrastructure to distribute it efficiently and (b) to convince U.S. manufacturers that St. Louis is the logical point from which to ship goods to the burgeoning Chinese market.

As to point (a), the region seems to be making progress. On Thursday night, Zhou Wenzhong, the Chinese ambassador to the United States, hosted a dinner at the Chinese Embassy in Washington for a group that included most of the Missouri congressional delegation, Gov. Jay Nixon, Charlie Dooley and Steve Ehlmann, the county executives of St. Louis and St. Charles counties, respectively, and area business leaders.

Missouri Republican Sen. Christopher S. "Kit" Bond used the occasion to announce that he'd been selected as the vice chairman of the U.S.-China Interparliamentary Exchange Group, which works on closer ties between the Senate and the Chinese government.

Mr. Nixon was taking bows for scraping up \$1.1 million from the battered state budget to market the so-called Midwest China Hub, a good part of which could be used to pay Mr. Rohrman's consulting fees and expenses.

Which brings us to point (b): the St. Louis Airport Commission is close to a deal with AeroTerm LLC, of Annapolis, Md., to develop 76 acres on the airport property as an air-freight distribution center. Mr. Rohrman's job will be to convince manufacturers and shippers to use this and other facilities if the China hub proposal advances.

There are still a lot of unconnected spokes in the China hub, but the potential is enormous. Eventually, a huge new industry could grow in St. Louis, helping to replace the manufacturing jobs that have fled. Warehouses and shippers, per se, don't employ a lot of people, but the spin-off economic potential is enormous, particularly from Chinese businesses. One of the key leaders in the hub project is Clayton attorney Steven M. Stone. His cousin, Stephen Perry, chairman of the London Export Commission, is a member of the family that helped reopen China's trade with the West.

Mr. Stone also is a partner with developer Paul J. McKee Jr., whose NorthPort business center east of Lambert Airport is in the designated foreign trade zone. Mr. McKee's proposed NorthSide development project in St. Louis eventually might house headquarters and offices for companies in Chinese-American trade.

This group of St. Louisans deserves credit for looking forward to what comes next for St. Louis, not bemoaning its lost glories. How great would it be that the city that boomed as a distribution point for goods and services for the opening of the American West could play the same role for the Far East.