

Triad could become an aerotropolis

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Aerotropolis. It sounds like a winged dinosaur that's been extinct for eons.

But, far from a relic of the past, it could be the key to the Triad's future, a concept that might even bring the Atlantic Ocean to our economic doorstep.

The term "Aerotropolis" was coined by economic-development expert John Kasarda to describe a regional economy based in the aviation industry but with equally good links to other forms of transportation.

"It's the best hope for being competitive in the 21st century," said Kasarda, director of the Kenan Institute for Private Enterprise at UNC-Chapel Hill.

Kasarda envisions a reinvigorated economy built around Piedmont Triad International Airport and the area's larger transportation network. The Triad's large web of rail and highway routes has been a key attribute for more than a century.

The future will include at least two new interstates, improved air and rail access, and even a possible link between the land-locked Triad and the major ports of North Carolina and South Carolina.

For Triad residents, living in an aerotropolis could mean more job opportunities in more professions, higher incomes and a greater level of direct access -- by road, rail and air - to places ranging from the coast to the Midwest, Northeast and Canada.

Indeed, there are exciting transportation developments on the horizon, starting with the scheduled opening next year of the FedEx Mid-Atlantic Hub at PTI.

"I don't think anyone really has grasped yet what FedEx is going to do for our region," said Doug Galyon, a Greensboro resident and chairman of the state Board of Transportation.

The project includes a \$300 million, state-of-the-art sorting hub to handle packages FedEx is shipping to and from locations along the Eastern seaboard.

The project also includes \$250 million in additional PTI improvements, the centerpiece being a third runway scheduled to open in time for the hub's June 2009 debut.

Thousands of packages will pass through PTI each day, arriving and departing by air or truck, giving the region a new level of overnight connectivity with the nation and the global economy.

Galyon and other community leaders see it as a magnet to attract companies on the cutting edge of modern manufacturing.

"Manufacturing has always been about bringing raw materials in and sending finished products out," said Dan Lynch of the Greensboro Economic Development Alliance. "But now it's more sophisticated."

Companies such as Dell, HondaJet and Polo.com are among those already brought to the Triad, at least in part, by FedEx's plans. When the hub actually gets up and running, more are sure to follow, Galyon and Lynch suggest.

But what about the land-locked Triad's possible future on the high seas?

Kasarda thinks that also could be a hub benefit, stemming from new relationships with port communities such as Morehead City and Wilmington.

Shipping containers could be removed from seagoing vessels at either port and forwarded to the Triad within hours for unpacking, processing and redistribution. Perishables such as produce, other food and flowers could be brought into the PTI area by container for speedy movement by air, rail or highway, Kasarda said.

The Triad's roots as a transportation hub go back a century to entrepreneurs such as Lunsford Richardson and brothers Moses and Ceasar Cone, who exploited the area's excellent rail connections in, respectively, the pharmaceutical and textile industries.

And rail might play a renewed role in the region's success in the 21st century, Galyon said.

Greensboro is fortunate, he said, to be included as a stop on the Southeast High Speed Rail Corridor to New Orleans: The first section, from Washington to Charlotte, is scheduled to open in 2013, although the rest is still being planned.

"It will be double-tracked all the way," Galyon said, "so passenger and freight trains are compatible with each other."

Good highways supplanted the railroad as the Triad's chief transportation feature in the mid-20th century, eventually resulting in Interstates 85 and 40 merging in Greensboro. Those two major highways turned the region into a significant trucking center linking Atlanta, Charlotte, Raleigh and points northeast and west.

But the area's highway system, it turns out, was only partly complete.

Two additional interstates - I-73 and I-74 - are under construction in Guilford County and other parts of the state.

Construction schedules are less certain elsewhere, so there's no target date for completing the new roads in their entirety. But in time, they particularly will strengthen the Triad's access to the Midwest.

I-73 is planned to go all the way through Michigan to Sault Ste. Marie on the Canadian border. I-74 will offer a more direct route to Cincinnati.

Greensboro's recently completed western Urban Loop will carry interstates 73 and 40 partly around town, merging with I-85 southwest of the city just before I-73 peels off to the south.

And what is arguably the region's fifth interstate is planned to intersect the 41-mile loop's yet-to-be built, northeastern section: The upgrade of U.S. 29 to interstate standards from Greensboro to Danville, Va., resulting in the new designation of Interstate 785.

Meanwhile, Triad educators are responding to the continuing evolution with degree programs. N.C. A&T, UNCG and Guilford Technical Community College all have developed programs to educate the professionals of tomorrow in transportation, logistics and applied technology.

Earlier this year, Guilford County voters approved more than \$50 million in bonds to build a new GTCC campus that will house all the community college's transportation offerings, including its aviation school.

"I think this is going to account for a tremendous number of jobs in the years ahead," GTCC President Don Cameron said of the transportation industry.

If everything works out as planned, the Triad's transportation graduates can look ahead to prosperous careers in America's newest aerropolis.

But Galyon suggests that as much as the Triad's future might merit a new title, an old nickname from Greensboro's past as a railroad center might work, too.

"Twenty years from now," he said, "this will once again truly be The Gate City."

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