

Paper: Kansas City Star, The (MO)

Title: New council panel aims to steer KC's role in global trade

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Date: March 25, 2006

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Kansas City Mayor Kay Barnes has created a City Council committee to deal with the city's expanding role in international trade.

"I believe Kansas City can be a leader in international trade and economic development, and the expertise on this committee will help us achieve this set of ambitious goals," Barnes said in a prepared statement.

City Councilman Troy Nash said, "This is a signal that Kansas City is willing, ready and able to do business."

Nash, a longtime director of the People to People International program in Kansas City, will serve as the panel's chairman. Others on the committee are council members Bonnie Sue Cooper, who be vice chairman of the panel; George Blackwood; Deb Hermann; and John Fairfield. The staff aide will be Jody Edgerton, director of the city's International Affairs and Trade Office, established by Barnes in 1999. The committee is set to hold its first meeting Thursday.

Cooper and Blackwood are directors of the city's nonprofit Kansas City, Missouri-Mexico Business Development Corp., which has developed relationships with Mexico in recent years and assists local interests in doing business south of the border.

Barnes charged the committee with responsibility for international trade; tourism; education; culture and economic development, including emerging trade deals with Mexico and Canada; development of the former Richards-Gebaur airfield as an intermodal freight center; and the Sister Cities International and People to People programs.

City officials for a decade have been laying the groundwork for expanded trade with Mexico. The city's "Mexiplex" at 16th and Baltimore streets opened in 2003 to foster increased trade and tourism with Mexico. The only binational office of its kind in the United States, the structure houses the Kansas City-Mexico Business Development Corp.; the regional office of the Mexican Consulate; trade and tourism representatives for the Mexican cities of Guadalajara, Monterrey, Manzanillo and the state of Michoacan; the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Greater Kansas City; and regional offices of the North American International Trade Corridor Partnership that merged recently with North America's SuperCorridor Coalition, which Blackwood is president of.

Local officials have negotiated agreements fostering business and government relationships with counterparts in Mexico to develop sea and land trade corridors linking Kansas City to Asia and other regions through Mexican ports.

If the U.S. State Department agrees, an unprecedented agreement with Mexico could be announced this year for the first foreign customs house on U.S. soil.

Under the agreement, Mexican-bound U.S. truck freight would be inspected by U.S. and Mexican authorities in Kansas City, then sealed for movement directly to Mexican destinations with fewer costly delays at border choke points.

Mexican shippers and deepwater-port operators would partner with rail and highway transportation and foreign trade zone warehousing groups in Kansas City to market an international trade pipeline that would avoid capacity-strained West Coast ports.

Mexican officials recently named a veteran diplomat in its Washington, D.C., Embassy to lead the Kansas City operation.

The city also has announced an agreement to sell Richards-Gebaur this year to private interests for redevelopment as an intermodal transit hub that would probably include a second Mexican customs port for rail cargo.

Last summer, city officials signed similar cooperative trade agreements with the Canadian province of Manitoba and the city of Winnipeg, and are working toward another with Veracruz, Mexico, that would offer Kansas City a trade link to European sea shipping lanes.

For more information, click on the "international" link at www.kcmo.org.

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First glance

Among the panel's responsibilities will be international trade, tourism, education, culture and economic development, and development of the former Richards-Gebaur airfield as an intermodal freight center.

Photo

Nash

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