

Tradepoint Atlantic making an impact

Joe Nathanson//July 26, 2024//



It had been nearly eight years since I visited southeastern Baltimore County to see what was happening at Sparrows Point, the site where Bethlehem Steel had been producing steel products and engaged in shipbuilding for the better part of a century.

When I visited in 2016, steelmaking had already ended four years earlier. Shipbuilding had stopped much sooner. What had been the largest steel-producing facility in the world in the mid-1950s, employing over 30,000 workers at its peak, had finally succumbed to foreign competition.

A succession of new entities attempting to make a go at steelmaking had also failed to gain economic viability, and the site had been sold to a new group with a vastly changed vision for this stretch of land strategically located on the Baltimore waterfront.

What I remembered from that 2016 visit was a bleak, gray “moonscape;” what I didn’t fully appreciate then was that important work was well underway, clearing out no longer used structures, remediating land subjected to decades of industrial pollution, and preparing the real estate for entirely new uses.

Earlier this month, along with two colleagues, I made a return visit to Tradepoint. We met with Aaron Tomarchio, executive vice president, corporate affairs. Referring to a large site map of the 3,300-acre property, he highlighted the advantages of this site, branded as a “multi-modal center for global trade.”

These include direct access to interstate highways, connections to both CSX and Norfolk Southern freight railroads, and deep-water port facilities with access to the Port of Baltimore's 50-foot main shipping channel.

Taking advantage of these assets are major tenants, including some very well-known brands, such as Amazon, McCormick, Under Armour, Volkswagen, and FedEx. Amazon alone has three warehouse/ fulfillment centers employing 5,000 workers.

All told a total of 13,000 are employed by Tradepoint tenants, while on any given day 20,000 are likely to be on the site, including construction workers building new facilities. An example of that was a new 400,000-square-foot warehouse structure being built for the University of Maryland Medical System.

After a thorough briefing by Tomarchio, we were prepared to see what was actually happening. For this we had the benefit of a tour of the site in a vehicle driven by Kristin King, director of corporate affairs. We drove by the site where an old Beth Steel building was being repurposed for US Wind, a company that will fabricate wind turbines to be used in offshore wind farms.

Our drive also took us to a vantage point where we could see the remaining piers and truncated roadways of the Francis Scott Key bridge.

Tradepoint Atlantic played a number of key roles after the bridge disaster in March. First, it provided cargo shipping capacity to make up to some degree for the loss of cargo shipments during the period that shipping in and out of the main cargo terminals was curtailed.

Tradepoint was also critical to dealing with the huge sections of the bridge trusses that were cut away and deposited on a 5-acre section of land made available for the salvage operation. There, the steel sections were cut into smaller pieces, transferred to another nearby location and diced into even smaller steel pieces. The resulting scrap metal was then ready to be transported offsite to be made into recycled steel products.

We also caught sight of a large vessel in port, proudly noting that it was fueled by LNG (liquid natural gas). The Liberian-flagged vessel Siem Confucius was there with a singular

purpose: to transport roll-on/ roll-off (RO/RO) cargo in the form of Volkswagen vehicles. This vehicle carrier with its 13 decks can accommodate 4,700 cars.

As our tour neared an end, we reached the area named the “retail district,” which meets some of the basic needs of the many workers. Offerings include a Starbucks, Denny’s, Popeyes, and Royal Farms.

As Tradepoint Atlantic attends to these everyday needs, it looks ahead to having an even greater impact on the Port of Baltimore and the regional economy. Days after our visit the company released a consultant’s report on the economic impact of a new Sparrows Point Container Terminal. This project, in the works since 2022, consists of a 3,000-foot-long wharf equipped with cranes and an adjoining container yard, in all encompassing 330 acres.

By 2035, according to the impact study, the terminal would add \$1.5 billion annually to the Maryland economy and generate 8,000 direct and indirect jobs. This expansion of the port’s container handling capacity is expected to be in operation by 2026.

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