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# Leaders pitch Bay area as single market for international trade

By JOSH BOATWRIGHT

Tribune staff

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ST. PETERSBURG — Comparing the merits of Tampa to St. Petersburg may be endlessly fascinating to baseball fans, but it makes a lot less sense to foreign corporations sizing up the economy of one of the top 20 metro areas in the nation.

As Tampa Mayor Bob Buckhorn put it at an International Town Hall held Friday at St. Petersburg's Hilton Carillon Park hotel, "The days of us marketing our respective cities at the expense of someone else are over – over."

Buckhorn stood on a stage next to St. Petersburg Mayor Rick Kriseman to kick off a now annual event highlighting the Tampa Bay region's strides toward becoming a major player in international trade.

An alliance of business leaders, tourism promoters and government officials on both sides of the bay scored a big win two years ago with the announcement of new air service on Panama's Copa Airlines, Latin America's leading carrier that has linked the Tampa region to dozens of cities in Central and South America.

The newly-dubbed Tampa Bay Export Alliance then made an unprecedented joint trade mission to Chile in December, which yielded about \$9 million new trade deals between foreign businesses and 14 local companies which attended.

On Friday, the group hailed the promise of new trade in Europe this fall with the start of non-stop flights from Tampa International Airport to Frankfurt on Lufthansa Airlines, connecting travelers to destinations across Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

Germany already has strong business and tourism ties with the Tampa Bay area and Lufthansa executive Donald Bunkenburg told a packed ballroom that adding the new route here simply made good financial sense.

"Germany is Tampa's third largest source of direct investment and the second largest source of inbound passenger markets from Europe after the U.K.," said Bunkenburg, Lufthansa's managing director of corporate sales and regions for North America.

With strong advanced bookings, Lufthansa expects a good mix of leisure and business travelers to make the Tampa flights a success.

The new route will make it easier to bring a trade expo to Germany that will give local companies a chance to sell their products to the European market, says Mike Meidel, director of Pinellas County Economic Development.

A second trade mission to Toronto is also in the works for this fall.

When they make the rounds with those Canadian companies, economic development officials will no longer give separate presentations about their respective county's assets.



At an event held earlier this week at the Tampa Club, Hillsborough County development officials didn't stick to talking points about downtown Tampa, the port or the new Riverwalk when describing the area to a business delegation from Panama.

"It was all about Hillsborough and Pinellas County, about downtown Tampa and St. Pete and Clearwater; it was the whole region as one – seamless – and it makes a huge impression on people," said Rick Homans, president of the Tampa Hillsborough Economic Development Corporation.

As Tampa International Airport embarks on a \$1 billion build-out and Port Tampa Bay makes way for new \$24 million cranes that can handle the massive cargo coming this direction through an expanded Panama Canal, companies in Clearwater stand to benefit as much as those in Tampa.

They are businesses such as Hydro-Dyne Engineering in Clearwater, which inked several hefty contracts with companies in Chile for the custom-made water filtering systems it manufactures.

A major impetus for forming the export alliance a year ago was the recognition that Tampa Bay area businesses actually lag way behind similar sized metros in export sales.

A study by the Brookings Institute ranked Tampa 88 out of the 100 top metro areas in the country for exports and local leaders hope the new partnership will bring the local market closer to the average.

"A lot of our companies are small, they're 20 to 30 employees, and they're happy. They're making great sales and all of that. So, this is helping to find those few that say, 'Okay, I'm doing well, but I want to double it,'" Meidel said.



Another hot trade topic at Friday's town hall was the prospect of increased commerce with one of Florida's closest neighboring countries, Cuba.

Officials from the U.S. Department of Commerce advised that updated federal regulations published in January have expanded legal trade opportunities from agricultural goods and medicines to a variety of categories that include building materials, agricultural equipment and tools, and even products that support small entrepreneurs, such as auto mechanics or barbers.

Whether Tampa becomes a leading player in future relations with Cuba, particularly in trade, isn't clear as many port cities across the United States are ramping up their shipping capacities, said Walter

Bastian, former deputy assistant secretary for the Western Hemisphere at the commerce department.

“You’ve got a lot of competition out there,” he said.

Concurrent with all these efforts to spur more international trade in the bay area is a joint effort among the region’s two major tourism agencies to put Tampa Bay in the running with Orlando and Miami as a destination for foreign travelers.

Visit St. Pete/Clearwater and Visit Tampa Bay both have played integral roles in recent trade missions and in pitches to add new airline service.

As with other kinds of business, the crucial thing is for the Tampa Bay brand to grow in as many markets as possible, said David Downing, director of the Pinellas tourism agency.

“Something that concerns me every day is currency fluctuations,” said Downing, noting the rising value of the dollar against the Euro and the Brazilian Real. “How much more expensive are we this year compared to last year?”

“We try to hedge our bets by putting our lines out into as many different areas in the world as possible.”

[jboatwright@tampatrib.com](mailto:jboatwright@tampatrib.com)

(727) 215-1277

Twitter: @JBoatwrightTBO