

JACKSONVILLE TRADE AND LOGISTICS

Prioritizing prosperity

Economic growth propels NE Florida forward

By Karen Robes-Meeks



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WHEN IT COMES to economic growth, Jacksonville is on the rise.

The northeastern Florida city — known as “Jax” to locals — has seen a flood of jobs and folks eager to relocate. Jacksonville had a 5 percent uptick in population from 2019 to 2021 and a 12.8 percent spike in median earnings, according to a new LendingTree study that named Jacksonville one of the nation’s

biggest “Boomtowns,” the Florida Times-Union reported March 1.

“With 600 new jobs coming to the area, this growth is unlikely to slow down,” the article stated. “Some employers have had to find unique or competitive benefits to attract employees in a booming job market, and demands for office space have remained consistent with this type of growth.”



Jacksonville's population grew 5 percent from 2019 to 2021.

Jacksonville Port Authority

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Logistics providers are also eyeing Jacksonville as a desirable location for expansion and market share diversification, with its uncongested harbor, international reach, burgeoning workforce pool of skilled labor, and seamless rail and highway network.

"Jacksonville is a great place to do business," said Brandon Nelson, senior project manager for ATS International Services, which has been in the Jacksonville area for more

than 30 years. ATS International primarily serves the US/Puerto Rico non-containerized, specialized transportation sector as an asset-based non-vessel-operating common carrier (NVO).

to get into and out of Jacksonville," Nelson said. "Jacksonville has everything you would expect from a big city but [provides] the small-town feel when it comes to customer service."

"Jacksonville has everything you would expect from a big city but [provides] the small-town feel when it comes to customer service."

than 30 years. ATS International primarily serves the US/Puerto Rico non-containerized, specialized transportation sector as an asset-based non-vessel-operating common carrier (NVO).

"There are roughly 98 million consumers within a 500-mile radius of Jacksonville, and our interstate system [I-95/I-10/I-75] makes it easy

made Jacksonville the right location for its corporate headquarters; largest logistics office within its network; and port operations, located at Jacksonville Port Authority's (Jaxport's) Blount Island Marine Terminal.

Available space — land, warehousing, and offices — is a very attractive feature when businesses are considering the area for

relocation moves, Luciano added.

Jacksonville also offers a diverse and deep talent pool, with multiple universities in the region supporting the development of future trade and logistics leaders and a significant population of retired service members.

"There are a number of military personnel who stay in the area after retirement, bringing their experience and work ethic to support the growth of our region's businesses," Luciano said.

The port authority is working with its tenants and career resources to cultivate this talent, said Jaxport CEO Eric Green.

It "gives us an advantage that a lot of other ports don't have," he said. "In the next year or so, we'll be adding nearly 7 million square feet of warehousing, so there's plenty [of opportunity]. We're able to retain those folks and their skilled workforce right here in Jacksonville."

As Florida's biggest container seaport, Jaxport is also one of the most diversified in the country, in terms of trade lanes and business lines, offering service from more than 40 ocean carriers and an expansive foreign trade zone. Last year, the 1,500-acre,

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Jaxport and its tenants are advancing multiple projects to bolster cargo efficiency.

Jacksonville Port Authority

full-service international seaport processed close to 1.3 million containers. It has long been a major harbor for handling vehicles and breakbulk cargo, such as forest products.

Approximately 90 percent of all goods heading to Puerto Rico — Jaxport's No. 1 trading partner — move through the Port of Jacksonville, serviced by Trailer Bridge, Tote Maritime Puerto Rico, and Crowley Maritime.

In the last 24 months, Jaxport has added five new ocean carrier services, most recently Mediterranean Shipping Co., which is adding Jacksonville to its trans-Atlantic network, the Baltic-Northern Europe-US East Coast "Scan Baltic to USA" service. The new service is expected to start calling the SSA Jacksonville Container Terminal at Blount Island Marine Terminal in late April, giving Florida exporters of food and beverages, forest products, and automotive parts a direct service connection to North Europe.

Continued growth at Jaxport, which attracts new business to the region, creates opportunities for logistics providers, Luciano said.

The addition of these new services is exciting to see at a port that has expanded steadily over the years — even during a

Shift your thinking

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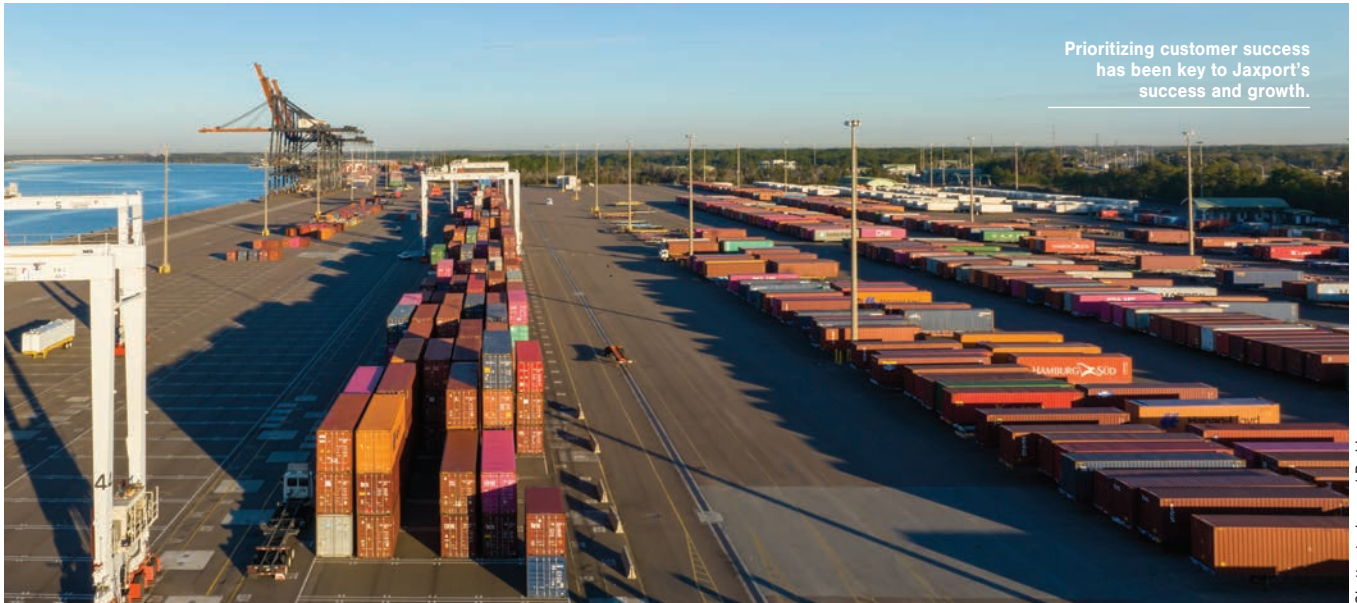
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Prioritizing customer success has been key to Jaxport's success and growth.

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pandemic — and anticipates more growth toward the end of the year, Green said. The port and its tenants are advancing on a series of multimillion-dollar projects aimed at

bolstering cargo efficiency.

“That’s how we want to grow; you don’t want the floodgates to open at once, [where] it’s all new and you’re trying to handle it,”

Green said. “The reason we were able to attract [five new services] ... is because of the non-congestion at our berth and our delivery turn times for beneficial cargo owners.”

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“What you will see from Jaxport is methodical growth over the next couple of years,” he added.

Many logistics providers have been leaning into that growth, including ATS International, which has expanded its off-port services over the past decade.

The pandemic prompted more international shippers to add Jacksonville to their supply chains, leveraging an option that offered less congestion than the Northeast and West Coast. Given this change, ATS International has added “many unique off-port transportation and cargo-handling services to better serve the needs of not only our current Puerto Rico customers, but customers of our local Jaxport partners as well,” Nelson said.

And in 2022, Trailer Bridge signed a long-term lease agreement with Jaxport to maintain its twice-weekly barge service between Jacksonville and Puerto Rico through 2041.

“More international shippers have added Jacksonville to their supply chain model due to our lower congestion compared to the Northeast and West Coast.”

The agreement, expected to go into effect at the end of 2023, mirrors one that Trailer Bridge signed with the Puerto Rico Ports Authority (PRPA) in 2021.

“This service is critical to the supply chain providing the island with the goods [people] need for their daily lives,” Luciano said. “Our roll-on, roll-off barge also supports the ongoing rehabilitation of the island’s electrical grid and other rebuilding efforts following several years of storms that have negatively impacted the quality of life there.”

Approximately 22 percent of the cargo that moves between Jacksonville and Puerto Rico flows through Trailer Bridge, PRPA Executive Director Joel A. Pizá-Batiz said in a June 22 company announcement.

“Knowing that Trailer Bridge will operate from Jaxport for another 18 years gives us a lot of commercial certainty as we plan for the future,” he said.

Prioritizing customer service has been key to Jaxport’s success and growth.

“We have the ability to reach 90 million customers in the next 24 to 48 hours,” Green

said. “When you have a great experience with someone or something, you always want to try and recapture that experience. So we’re [focused on] ... trying to ensure that your experience gets better every time. Not only are we looking at

repeat customers, but that experience helps us to build new customers, too.” ■

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Evolution and advancement

Providers expanding, developing to capture business

By Karen Robes-Meeks

AS THE COMPETITION for cargo market share heats up, supply chain providers across Jacksonville have been advancing several strategic infrastructure projects and development initiatives in an effort to capture that sought-after business.

Trailer Bridge recently expanded its Jacksonville logistics office to support the significant growth that division has been experiencing over the past three years, said CEO Mitch Luciano. In 2022, the company hired more than 125 team members across the organization, pushing its headcount above 300. To support the needs of a rapidly expanding customer base, Trailer Bridge recently received its license to import/export

freight in and out of Puerto Rico and is actively making connections with agents around the globe.

Other service expansions include a government team, an intermodal group focused on rail and drayage moves, and a team specializing in less-than-truckload shipments, he said.

The company also recently launched Trailer Bridge International, the non-vessel-operating common carrier division of the company, opening its ability to ship freight internationally for shippers, Luciano said, adding that this team works out of its Jacksonville logistics office with team members also in Puerto Rico.

ATS International Services is another

Jacksonville-area business in the midst of significant investment, as it continues to fund acquisition opportunities that augment its current service offerings, as well as those in other logistics market segments, said Brandon Nelson, senior project manager for ATS.

For example, the company recently completed an acquisition that will expand its Department of Defense shipment capabilities in the arms, ammunition, and explosives and classified shipment segment, Nelson said. ATS also plans to continue its history of investment in equipment innovations in all market segments it serves.

One innovation is the Breakbulk Box, a 53-foot box that was tested in Jacksonville and

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brought to market in 2016 by ATS. The box allows for breakbulk cargo to be side-loaded and off-loaded similar to a flatbed or flat rack; when loaded, the box acts as a shipping container.

"ATS is well positioned to continue the consistent growth we have enjoyed over the past many years," Nelson said. "We are expanding both our asset and non-asset businesses, and capturing additional market share through both organic and acquisition growth."

In the area of innovation, Trailer Bridge is also expanding its tech capabilities, having recently launched the MasterMind™ product across its logistics branches. The new cloud-based transportation management system, a product of Mastery Logistics Systems, gives heightened visibility into customers' freight movement and efficiency in its operations, Luciano explained.

"Leadership within local government and economic development agencies ... are pro-business, which allows the region and state to remain competitive."

"This consolidates our technologies and service offerings to enhance the customer and employee experience," he said, adding that "the future looks like continued growth and investment in our expansion, with the goal to be a billion-dollar company by 2027."

Trailer Bridge is also working to develop a 121,000-square-foot warehouse on 9.21 acres adjacent to its corporate headquarters just a few miles from Jaxport's Blount Island and Dames Point marine terminals.

"The project is still in its development and approval phase, but we are confident it can be the right asset for shippers using our region as a logistics hub for their supply chain," Luciano said.

A significant element of Jacksonville's logistical successes in recent years has been a multilevel effort, he noted.

"Leadership within local government and economic development agencies, as well as on the state level, are pro-business, which allows the region and state to remain competitive," Luciano said.

State and local agencies, for example, are helping the Jacksonville Port Authority (Jaxport) fund a major effort to raise the

height of power lines above the port's main vessel channel at St. John's River near Blount Island Terminal. The lines would be lifted 30 feet to 205 feet. Earlier this year, city council members approved a \$22.5 million grant toward the project, matching the amount awarded in December by the Florida

Department of Transportation, the Journal of Commerce reported Jan. 11. The city also agreed to help bridge project costs with a separate \$5 million loan.

Jacksonville has been bustling with projects, including the 47-foot harbor deepening through Blount Island that was



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Supply chain providers across Jacksonville have been advancing several strategic infrastructure projects and development initiatives.

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completed in May 2022 under budget and ahead of schedule.

“With that channel deepening, we were able to create a two-way shipping channel,

which means that ships that are 15,000 TEU or less can move in and out of the harbor both ways,” said Jaxport CEO Eric Green.

The port is also in talks with current tenants

for nearly 300,000 additional square feet of warehousing space, expected to wrap up in the next 60 to 90 days, he added.

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the port underwent \$100 million in berth enhancements to add 2,600 linear feet at that facility, giving Blount Island the ability to accommodate two post-Panamax ships simultaneously.

Blount Island is also the new home for Southeast Toyota, the largest distributor of Toyota's vehicles, thanks to a \$210 million agreement that would allow the distributor to relocate to Blount Island and expand vehicle processing operations.

Jaxport is investing in making port operations more efficient as well as more sustainable.

Toyota plans to expand on a new eight-acre footprint, an approximately \$70 million build out that will enable it to handle well over 150,000 to 200,000 vehicles a year, Green said.

With an aim to become a "port of the future," Jaxport plans to not only make port operations more efficient but more sustainable through the electrification of port equipment.

Last year, the US Department of Transportation's Maritime Administration

(MARAD) awarded the Jacksonville Port Authority a \$23 million grant for electric refrigerated container stacks, hybrid- and battery-electric yard equipment, and 15 fast-charging stations, according to a Feb. 9 Journal of Commerce article.

Meanwhile, developments at two major international terminal operators are ongoing at the port. SSA Atlantic at Blount Island Terminal is in the midst of a yard-expansion project of approximately 90 acres, which include three

new electrified container cranes set to arrive at the terminal this summer.

Funded by SSA with a grant from MARAD, the project is expected to double existing container capacity by 2024, allowing them to go from processing 250,000 containers currently to 500,000 containers by the end of 2024, Green said.

Ceres Jacksonville at Dames Point Terminal is also undergoing \$42 million in

terminal improvements, including container-handling equipment and systems upgrades that launched last year and are anticipated to run through 2024. The project includes the purchase of two new super-post-Panamax container cranes expected to arrive in 2024.

The port is also bolstering its roll-on, roll-off capabilities to ensure terminals remain congestion-free. For example, it is collaborating with the Florida Department of Transportation on \$45 million in berth upgrades to expand vehicle capabilities at Blount Island. The project calls for upgrading one auto berth to make room for two larger vehicle vessels at the same time, set for completion in 2025, as well as the expansion of a second berth to better accommodate larger vehicle ships calling the terminal, set for completion in the next 18 months.

"Everything we do, we work with our partners, and they see the benefit and the value of our port," Green said. "They've seen our port grow exponentially over the years, and without our partners, we wouldn't be able to ... see these projects come to fruition." ■

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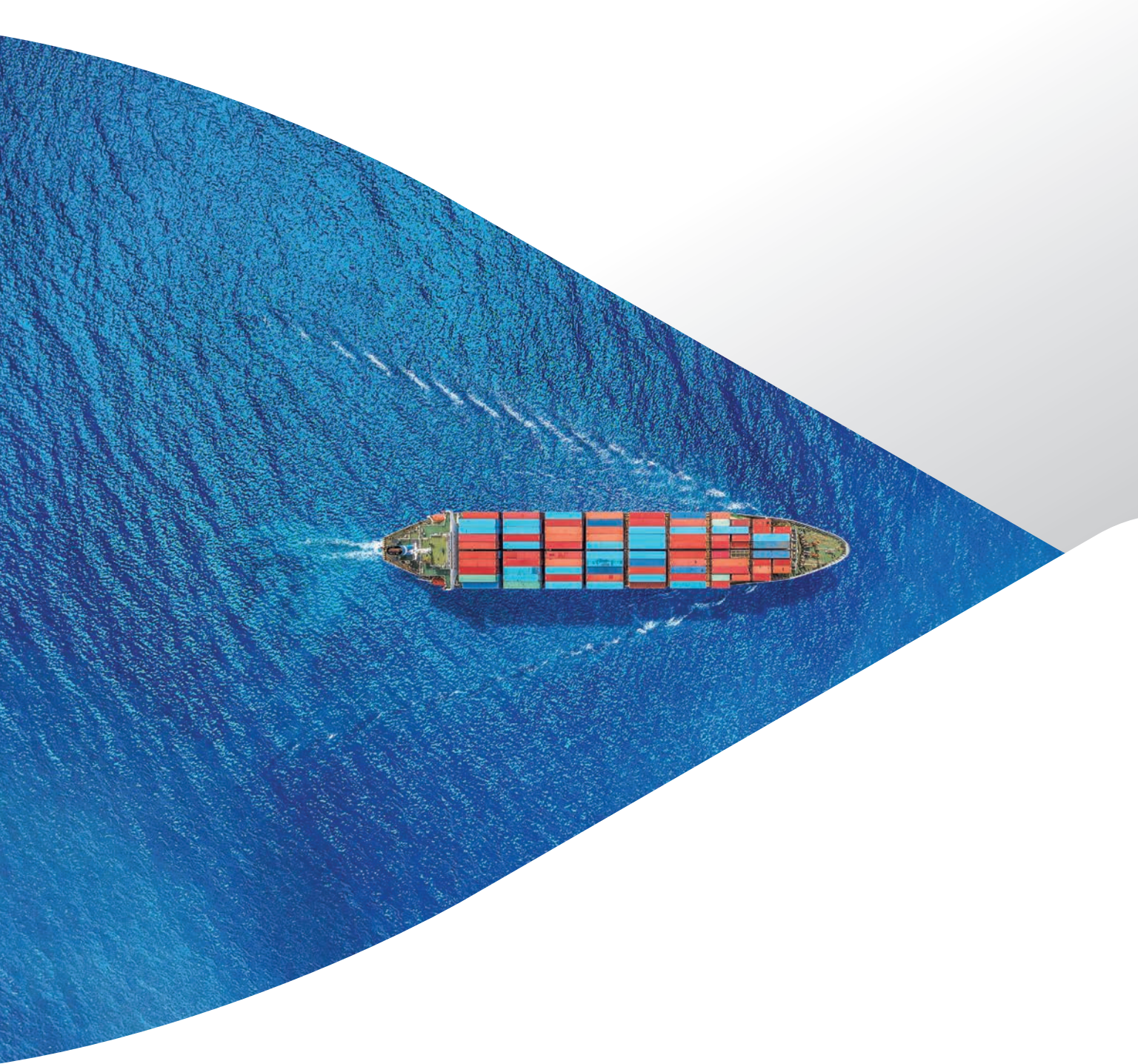
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