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Mixed mode takes a load off trucks

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QUEENSGATE - The four-story yellow contraption pulls over the truck trailer and lowers its claws. It grabs the trailer and lifts it as easily as a child would pick up a toy building block. Then, it swings the trailer around and stacks it atop another container on a flatbed rail car.

This goes on for about an hour, until a line of rail cars at least a half-mile long is filled with containers off-loaded from trucks.

The scene is playing out all over the country as areas seek to get trucks off highways, especially in major urban areas. Some say intermodal transportation - shipping that combines truck, rail and/or barge transit - is the best solution to growing congestion and pollution on America's roads.

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Locally based Parsec Inc., at work here today, has perfected the routine. It controls nearly half the nation's intermodal transportation business. Founded 29 years ago by Otto Budig Jr., the company generates \$209 million a year in revenues and employs 3,160 workers at 30 facilities in the U.S., Canada and Mexico.

Last year, the Queensgate company transferred 4.6 million containers from trucks to trains and back again. That number is up 300 percent since 1995, although business is off about 20 percent this year because of the recession.

"We can put 300 boxes that are bound for Target or Walmart or wherever onto one train from L.A. to Chicago for a fraction of the cost of what it would take to drive them by truck," says David Budig, Parsec vice president and Otto's son. His operation takes just two people to accomplish, he says, "compared with the equivalent of 600 drivers."

Others are getting into the act. The state of Ohio is investing \$3.6 million in federal stimulus funds to raise five bridges along the rail line between Cincinnati and Columbus to allow "double-stacked" container rail cars. Another \$1 million is coming from the Cincinnati area's main transportation planning agency, the Ohio-Kentucky-Indiana Regional Council of Governments. The Norfolk Southern railroad is investing another \$250,000.

"We really need to take a look at truck-to-rail operations," OKI executive director Mark Policinski says. "Those lousy, smoky, noisy railroad engines just may be part of the solution to all this."

Locally, a group of investors wants to build a \$26 million public port on the Ohio River that would take containers off barges and put them directly onto trains.

Other experts - including the operator of the area's busiest port - say there is little demand for containers to be shipped by barge. And the elder Budig acknowledges that intermodal isn't the total cure.

Trucks always will be needed, especially for trips shorter than 300 miles. But as the economy recovers, Otto Budig sees intermodal shipments as a possible solution both for congestion and for shippers looking for the cheapest way to move freight.

"It's more cost effective, it keeps trucks off the roads, at least off the busy highways, and it certainly is much less expensive," he says.

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