GUEST COLUMN

**Facility will boost economy and preserve roads**

Posted: 6:00 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 24, 2015

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It isn’t every day that we have the opportunity to celebrate an initiative that promises to benefit the economy and the environment. It isn’t often that we can applaud a chance to leverage relatively modest public and private investment in infrastructure for a potentially significant return. Opportunities to impact multiple parts of Georgia at once are unusual.

This is one of those moments.

The recently announced Appalachian Regional Port in Chatsworth will create new economic opportunity from northwest Georgia to Alabama, Tennessee and Kentucky beyond. Its 388-mile direct rail route to the Port of Savannah will reduce truck travel on our highways – particularly in the congested metro region – and carbon emissions with it. And expanding our state’s network of inland ports increases the economic competitiveness of the regions in which they are located and the home to our booming port on the coast.

When the new inland port opens in 2018 it will join the Cordele Inland Port, which offers a 200-mile direct rail route to the Port of Savannah, as part of the Georgia Ports Authority’s Network Georgia in its Rapid Routes initiative. Just as Cordele serves an agricultural region growing peanuts, cotton and forest products, the Appalachian Regional Port will serve an industrial region producing carpet and other flooring, automobiles, and other automotive components including tires.

Georgia Ports Authority will operate the inland port in a public-private partnership with the state, Murray County and CSX Transportation. Georgia will invest $10 million, Georgia Ports Authority $7.5 million, and Murray County $1 million – leveraging a private-sector investment by CSX of $5.5 million. The 42-acre facility, adjacent to U.S. 411 near Interstate 75, will handle import, export and domestic cargo – and offer cost-effective, environmentally friendly direct rail access.

The CSX rail route to northwest Georgia is anticipated to handle 50,000 containers annually, keeping 50,000 trucks off the roads here in the metro Atlanta region. This benefit extends beyond our region. It is estimated that each container moved by rail to the new inland port reduces 355 miles traveled by truck on Georgia highways. In addition to easing traffic and reducing carbon emissions, it has been noted that inland ports save money on highway maintenance. As AJC columnist Kyle Wingfield pointed out, trucks cause the most damage to our roads, and we spend $230,000 per line-mile to repave an interstate.

We are challenged as a region and state to balance continued economic growth with preserving our quality of life and protecting the environment. We know how critical today’s planning and investment in infrastructure is to the future. The Council for Quality Growth is grateful for the leadership of Gov. Nathan Deal and the state’s public and private partners, including the departments of economic development and transportation for their vision in building cargo infrastructure for today and tomorrow.

We are confident that environmental regulatory oversight of building and operating the inland port will ensure the protection of wilderness, rivers, parks and lakes in the region. After all, the Georgia Ports Authority has a demonstrated track record of protecting natural resources and promoting sustainability, from creating wetlands to converting diesel equipment to electric – and reducing energy consumption and light and noise pollution.

As we consider additional investment in transportation in Georgia, we should follow this example of infrastructure that supports employing Georgians in communities that grow and manufacture goods. We should look for these sorts of opportunities to use multiple modes of transportation to save wear and tear on our roads – and reduce harmful emissions. We should strive for public-private partnership. And we should do all we can to support Georgia’s leadership in global logistics and commerce.