

## **Container Cast: Ten Years of Partnership**

**MAT:** Welcome to ContainerCast, the trade and transportation podcast for the Center for International Trade and Transportation at California State University, Long Beach. I'm Mat Kaplan. Our guest is Dr. Thomas O'Brien, the CITT's Director of Research and Research Coordinator for the METRANS Transportation Center at CSULB and USC. Tom, welcome to yet another installment of ContainerCast.

**TOM:** Thank you, Mat.

**MAT:** We had a very special event not too long ago, and that was the tenth installment of our Town Hall Meetings on campus, the trade and transportation industry Town Hall. And I do want to recap a little bit what took place at this meeting, but we have a ten year history in your column that you did for the Business Journal. You kind of went through the history, tracing the topics that the Town Hall has covered over this decade.

**TOM:** Yeah. The Town Halls were designed to be a forum where a number of stakeholders could come, in a safe and comfortable setting, to address the concerns of the day. It was the first forum that incorporated the ILWU, the longshore union, so they were significant from the beginning because of that. But at a time when goods movement - international trade - was not really on the radar screen for a lot of people, including elected officials, this was a unique opportunity to sort of really get at the nuts and bolts - at the heart - of trade and transportation issues confronting the region; and from the beginning, we addressed critical issues: terminal operations, safety and security, the environment; and they've evolved over time, but they were always topical and always relevant.

**MAT:** And right from the start, big crowds for this, largely because of the participation of the ILWU, but very typically overflow crowds for the Carpenter Center here at Cal State Long Beach. And I think if I remember correctly, that very first year we were downtown at the Terrace Theater in Long Beach.

**TOM:** That's right. That was before my time, but I believe you're correct. And you're right, it has not been uncommon for us to have an audiences of anywhere from 750- 800 to over a thousand people to listen to expert panels, to watch informative videos and to provide their feedback and ask questions about the issues that pertain to goods movement and freight and international trade.

**MAT:** And sometimes the discussion has become a bit heated. These are not natural allies all the time, these groups that participate in the Town Hall.

**TOM:** No, and that's what happens when you bring labor and management together and maybe why people didn't do it for a number of years. And why CITT and the university and the college should get some credit, because when the hot topic of the day was labor negotiations, that obviously came up and revealed itself in the dynamics of the Town Hall, particularly if you had someone on the panel from the Pacific Maritime Association, which is the negotiating arm for the terminal operators. If you have someone from the PMA on the panel in front of a room full of ILWU members, you can be sure that you're going to get some interesting questions. And we did.

**MAT:** And I was there. And I remember thinking that this guy is showing a fair amount of courage; but I thought that the mood was considerably better by the end of that free and easy give-and-take than it was at the very beginning. I thought that it served both sides well to participate.

**TOM:** I think you're right. I mean each year that we do this, one of the things that we hope the Town Hall accomplishes is that it gives an opportunity for people to share their concerns in an environment and spirit of education, so it's an exchange of information - of opinion - but in a respectful manner; and that's one I think unique role that the university can play, and there are a host of forums out there now that I think reflect the individual agendas of industry segments and we try to be not that. We try to do something that's a little different, a little unique.

**MAT:** I think it has also been an eye opener and of some use to public officials, to regulators, who often have never been to any kind of a gathering like this.

**TOM:** Yeah, the Town Hall has been very helpful in that regard for those elected officials who are members of the audience and on those occasions where we actually ask them to be part of the Town Hall itself as a panel member because we might be talking about the role of state, local or the national government. And I think that that is one thing that I think we can be proud of, is that we've allowed the interaction to continue and to take place in other venues, but I think that CITT has played a critical role in bringing those people together in the first place.

**MAT:** How has the theme of the Town Hall evolved over the last ten years?

**TOM:** Well it really has reflected a growing awareness of trade and transportation issues. I think that in the beginning the topics were perhaps more general in nature. As the community became more aware and more informed, the topics became much more specific in nature. There was a lot of meat to the discussion, particularly when it came to the environment or security. Or this past year when we talked about the competitive nature of the ports given the economic situation that we're experiencing.

**MAT:** Yeah let's talk about this most recent Town Hall event, which was not the most cheerful of these events. It was actually rather sobering but that seemed to be very appropriate. It really seemed to make an impression on everyone who attended.

**TOM:** Yeah the interesting thing was for however sobering it was it may have been the one Town Hall where there was the greatest sense of accord or consensus in the room because I think everyone understood that they were on the same side when it came to keeping business coming through the ports - whether you're labor or management. There was really no other topic I think we could have addressed this year because, after a decade's worth of rapid growth, we're now wondering about the competitiveness of our region, what happens when the recovery begins, are we still going to have the same market share. There are a lot of unanswered questions. And it was sort of a fitting end to ten years -to the first ten years- of the Town Hall because the issues that we've talked about in the past - the environment, the impact that that's had in the way of new regulatory measures and container fees - are integral to the debate surrounding the competitiveness of the ports. So there really has been this evolution leading us to where we are today.

**MAT:**I suppose I should selfishly mention another important element of the Town Hall right from the beginning which was those videos produced by Advanced Media Production which is yet another division of the College of Continuing Education, Continuing and Professional Education, sorry new name. I think this year may be better than any other years. That video really set up the issue and set the tone for the discussion.

**TOM:** Yeah we have to give credit to Dave Kelly and the entire team at AMP. They do a tremendous, tremendous job every year; and I think they are really what makes the Town Hall an educational forum, because those videos have a shelf life. Even long after the Town Hall has ended, we can use the videos in our educational programs and the GLS program. As an educator and instructor, I do it all the time. We get numerous requests for the videos. They're balanced, they're informative, they're accurate, all the things that an educational video should be; and I think you're right. I think this year's may have topped them all.

**MAT:** And we should mention that those videos produced for the Town Hall and the Town Hall recordings themselves, because Advanced Media Production records those, those are I believe available on the CITT website--

**TOM:** That's correct

**MAT:**-- for people to check out. The videos have, in fact, been requested by other offices and other officials around the state and the nation because they've done such a good job.

**TOM:** And recognized with, rightly so, with awards.

**MAT:** You mentioned that there are other forums, but the Town Hall sort of took a different approach. Has the Town Hall become sort of a model? Have others emulated this format across this industry or perhaps others?

**TOM:** I think some have tried. There's certainly no lack of forums. There's no lack of opportunities to express your opinion. As I alluded to earlier, I think the unique thing about having a forum that is sponsored by the university is that we don't necessarily have a dog in the fight as it were. It's our goal to provide a neutral forum where people can come together. We don't start from the beginning of the evening with a specific agenda and I think that's what sets us apart. And there's certainly a place for those other forums, but I think we really blazed a trail in identifying a role for the university. As our good friend Domenick Miretti from the ILWU, who's a member of the CITT Policy and Steering Committee, has said, "One thing that CITT has done successfully is bring the university to the docks and the docks to the university." And I think that's something that all of the stakeholders can be proud of.

**MAT:** You bet. Thanks again Tom.

**TOM:** My pleasure, Mat.

**MAT:** You've just heard ContainerCast, where our guest has been Dr. Thomas O'Brien. ContainerCast is produced by the Center for International Trade and Transportation, a division of the College of

Continuing and Professional Education at California State University, Long Beach, and in partnership with the METRANS Transportation Center. We'd love to hear from you. Write to us at [citt@ccpe.csulb.edu](mailto:citt@ccpe.csulb.edu). We offer an outstanding selection of events, programs, and courses, including the Global Logistics Specialist program. Visit us online at [www.ccpe.csulb.edu/CITT](http://www.ccpe.csulb.edu/CITT) or call (562) 985-2872. That's (562) 985-2872.