

## What the largest container ship to visit Seattle means to the region

The container ship Benjamin Franklin is longer than two Space Needles and wider than a football field. It represents the future of global shipping.

By Mike Moore  
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ON Monday, the Port of Seattle greeted the largest container vessel ever to call on Washington state. The Benjamin Franklin is capable of carrying 18,000 20-foot equivalent units of containers. Laid end to end, the containers would stretch 68 miles from Tacoma to Everett. The vessel itself is longer than two Space Needles.

While the vessel is impressive, it also signals a sea change in the shipping industry — a change that is already reverberating up and down the West Coast, Canada, the Gulf of Mexico and the East Coast. Simply put, vessels are getting larger, shipping companies are consolidating through mergers, acquisitions, and vessel-sharing agreements. And they are looking for gateways to the Midwest and East Coast from Asia that provide for cost savings and maximum efficiencies.

The consolidations and larger ships mean fewer ports of call — which mean there will be winners and losers in the port industry. So why should policymakers care about the health and competitiveness of Washington state's ports?

First, there is the potential loss of well-paying waterfront jobs that pay well above the state's average. According to a 2013 King County Economic Development Council study, maritime jobs paid on average \$70,800 a year.

Second, imports from Asia support the infrastructure needed by Washington companies and farms to export their products overseas. Without a strong import market from Asia — either for local delivery or destined for the Midwest — Washington's producers face either higher operating costs or fewer options as they would need to seek other port gateways to export their products.

So how can Puget Sound ports compete to bring more of the new, larger, modern ships to port? The Benjamin Franklin, owned by the French container transportation and shipping company CMA CGM, is a test for the Pacific Northwest supply chain.

While we don't expect many of these vessels to call immediately, how the port and transportation infrastructure performs on this first call could set a tone for the competitive future of Puget Sound. Currently, the Port of Seattle's Terminal 18 is the only terminal that can accommodate this size vessel. There are plans to make other terminals in both Seattle and Tacoma "big-ship ready."

But it will take much more than "build it, they will come" to win in the new world of shipping. Cost, reliability and regulatory certainty are all key factors for ocean carriers, marine terminal operators and cargo interests when deciding what routing decisions to make or whether to make large investments in infrastructure.

The ports of Charleston, S.C., and Savannah, Ga., have plans to get big-ship ready, anticipating gains from an enlarged Panama Canal. The Canadians are executing their Asia-Pacific Gateways Initiative, aligning government and the private sectors with plans to improve infrastructure and capture even more container cargo from West Coast ports. These investments reach from the ports to off-dock infrastructure, and even include the purchase of rail lines in the U.S. Midwest.

If Washington's ports are to remain competitive in this new world, alignment of investments and public policy must be achieved at all levels of government to ensure terminal operators and vessel lines see the future here as providing a reliable, cost-effective and efficient gateway for their investment.

Monday's arrival of the Benjamin Franklin will either be a harbinger of good things to come or an opportunity lost. Either way, it is a really big ship.

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