

Major developments for Durban, Richards Bay

THIS has been once again an eventful week in the life of our two KwaZulu-Natal ports, not only in terms of ships arriving and sailing, but also because of several headline stories concerning things like the proposed dig-out port on the site of the Durban International Airport.

Also of note was news that Transnet is now looking at building a second railway to serve the needs of the port of Richards Bay and the coal industry.

The proposal will see the creation of a brand new railway that will absorb all the non-coal business from the existing coal line, which stands at about 15 million tons of mixed freight each year. The new railway would mean the Richards Bay coal line can become a dedicated coal line in future.

Last year the coal line, which is operated by Transnet Freight Rail (TFR), delivered 62.86 million tons of coal to Richards Bay Coal Terminal (RBCT), of which the terminal exported 63.427mt with the balance being drawn from RBCT's stockpile. To achieve this volume required 8 063 trains and 716 ships.

By comparison, at the end of May, TFR had delivered 25.722mt, which if annualised would amount to 61.84mt, meaning another year of under-achievement for the SA coal industry. RBCT has recently undergone upgrades that enable the terminal to handle up to 91 million tons of export coal a year.

TFR wants to build a new 450km line that will run through Swaziland to the port at Richards Bay. Siyabonga Gama, TFR's chief executive said last week that a memorandum of understanding had already been signed with Swaziland to investigate the viability of a new



An aerial view of what a new dig-out port near Isipingo would look like.

PICTURE: TRANSNET NATIONAL PORTS AUTHORITY

railway link through the Swazi kingdom. The proposed railway will cost R19 billion to build.

TFR already operates trains through Swaziland, on a railway that connects Komatipoort in the north with Gollel in the south, which in turn connects with the KZN North Coast line.

Gama said the purpose of the new line would be to remove up to 15m tons of general freight from the existing Richards Bay coal line.

The Richards Bay coal line was designed specifically to cater for coal exports and is worked by 100-wagon block trains hauling an average of 7 800 tons each.

TFR is building a new fleet of coal wagons that can carry 100t each, which will increase each train to 10 000 tons in weight.

With these available and the new locomotives, TFR will be much better equipped to deliver increased volumes of coal and enable South Africa to benefit from increasing demand for thermal coal from im-

porters such as India and China.

For the port of Richards Bay and the coal terminal in particular this is good news and the new line may mean that additional freight can be carried to the port, apart from coal but including other bulk commodities including minerals.

As far as the news about Durban is concerned, the prospect of a new dig-out port on the site of the former Durban International Airport has come a little closer with the announcement by Brian Molefe, Transnet's chief executive, that the transport parastatal is prepared to pay R1.5bn for the site.

Although the Airports Company (Acsa) is thought to be wanting considerably more – figures of between R2bn and R3bn have been bandied about – a compromise is likely to be reached together with the common understanding that now exists within the government that the new port has become a necessity.

That necessity has become more urgent with the news that the

SANDF wants its former base at Salisbury Island back. The base has catered for the needs of the navy since World War II, but in recent years the navy was forced to downsize to a small naval station for budgetary reasons.

Transnet intended taking over the former military base to expand container handling facilities. Naval requirements, meanwhile, were to be catered for on a smaller section of the jetty.

It's surprising how things can change within a short time.

With the advance of piracy into the Mozambique Channel, a whole new awareness of the role that the navy plays in the defence of the country has taken shape, demonstrated initially during the World Cup when the frigates took up station alongside the coastal cities to provide radar coverage for patrols by the air force, and more recently with an urgent request by SADC for South Africa to provide naval and air force support in defending the region against the approach of piracy.

What had happened was that Somali pirates began attacking ships within the Mozambique Channel, and between Christmas and New Year 2010 they succeeded in capturing a large Mozambique fishing vessel offshore of the port of Beira.

SADC issued an appeal to South Africa for help, resulting in the despatch of a frigate, the SAS Mendi, to the Mozambique port of Pemba, from where, with the support of an SA Air Force reconnaissance aircraft, the navy has been carrying out anti-pirate patrols.

With the ships of the South African navy now having to patrol in waters well to the north of South Africa, it is becoming essential for

them to have a base closer to the action than Simon's Town. With that in mind, the navy is understood to be considering basing a frigate at Durban as well as the fleet of patrol ships that will be built under Project Biro – ships that will be better suited for anti-piracy work than expensive frigates.

In terms of the port and Transnet's requirements, however, the loss of Salisbury Island as a future container terminal extension means added pressure on building the new port and container terminals on the old airport site.

For this, a timeline of starting construction in 2015 has been set with a completion date of 2019. In realistic terms, that's just around the corner and it means that a sense of urgency will be injected into the project.

For Durban, however, it has to be good news. The city developed because of its port, and is likely to stagnate and die if the value of the port is ever lost.

Durban Bay forms the lungs of the greater Durban and the port is its heart, but there is a limit to how far it can be extended. A new dig-out port to the south provides future solutions that wouldn't otherwise be possible.



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