

Full speed ahead: Truckers needed as freight demands increase

By Brett Herrmann | October 26, 2019



Scott Anderson

"Eastbound and down." David Peterson of Compton, a student at Illinois Valley Community College, practices backing up semi truck at the college's truck driver training facility in Oglesby. Job applications are stacked across several tables at Illinois Valley Community College's Truck Driver Training building just waiting for potential candidates to spill ink into the boxes and hand them in.

Who's hiring?

Just about everyone.

"I've never seen so many jobs available for drivers," said IVCC truck driver training program director Bruce Hartman. "It's got to be the economy."

Hartman's not wrong. Rapid growth in the logistics industry has led to high demand of truck drivers on the local level.

"The amount of freight transported in the United States is expected to increase significantly as a result of further economic growth, changing business and retail models, increasing international trade, and rapidly changing consumer expectations that place an emphasis on faster deliveries," a recent report by TRIP, a national transportation research nonprofit, states.

That impact has carried down to the local level. And Hartman said the demand for drivers has been more of a recent boom — mostly taking place over the past two years — than an ongoing trend.

"The sand jobs are big and the logistics jobs are big," he said. "Most students that come through have jobs before they graduate."

What's changed?

As TRIP noted in its study, consumer habits have changed how products are shipped across the country. Options like next day delivery have become commonplace, but are only possible with how distribution is currently set up.

"The whole concept of transportation of goods has changed dramatically over the past 20 years," said Don Schaefer, executive vice president of the Mid-West Truckers Association, based out of Springfield. He said the rise of distribution centers has made logistics a regional business. Long-haul truckers are less likely to take a 2,000 mile trip to the coast. He said trips today are more likely in the 600 mile range or shorter due to strategically placed distribution centers, such as Walmart's in Spring Valley. They are built right next to interstates where shipping containers can be hauled in, broken down, and shipped back out as needed.

"It's more cost effective and more efficient," Schaefer said.

And he said to keep expecting more logistics centers to pop up due to the way consumers purchase products.

"The economy is absolutely good," he said.

"It's been good and it's going to keep being good because of demand."

Where does the area stand?

In 2016, Illinois ranked third in the nation in the total value of freight shipped by all modes of transportation, including truck, rail, water, air and pipeline, according to TRIP's study.

Illinois also has two of the worst truck bottleneck areas for interstates along the Interstates 90 and 94 corridor in the Chicago area.

While the Illinois Valley's interstates are not among the worst, TRIP's study shows that both Interstate 80 and Interstate 39 are among the top tiers in the nation for the volume of truck traffic. And TRIP predicts the volume of truck traffic will increase by 140% between 2012 and 2045.

But has the increase been noticeable to local trucking companies?

"I haven't noticed any real surge in freight," said Vince Luckey of Luckey Trucking, a Streator-based company. "But (Interstate) 39 has taken a bigger and bigger portion."

The relatively new interstate offers north/south passage around the congestion of Chicago without an abundance of tolls and has seen increasing truck volumes in recent years.

"It has steadily increased and continues to increase," Schaefer said.

And Schaefer said Interstate 80 continues to be problematic, especially to the east in the

Joliet area. The Illinois Department of Transportation plans to replace the Des Plaines River bridge on Interstate 80 in the next five years, but Schaefer said he hopes the state considers adding another lane to the interstate from Joliet across the state to the Quad Cities.

"We would hope in the long range they would extend that third lane," he said.

Luckey said while there is some congestion in the area, it's nothing too severe compared to other roads in the region.

"It can be heavy, but it's nothing to get too excited about," he said.

Is the infrastructure holding up?

Monday, the Illinois Department of Transportation released its annual five-year plan showing the state plans to spend \$23 billion on road improvements by 2025. Gov. J.B. Pritzker said this is double what the state was originally planning to spend thanks to the state legislator's approval of the governor's \$45 billion Rebuild Illinois program last summer plus Illinois' recent fuel tax increase.

Millions of dollars will be spent on roads in the Illinois Valley area, including interstates and highways. Hartman said the improvements can't come soon enough for routes like U.S. 52 or U.S. 34 where he has noticed the road crumbling away from the shoulder.

"They just paint over the gravel," Hartman said. "They have not kept up with the traffic."

Luckey said any improvements would be welcome, but local roads are not any worse than others in the region.

"I don't think we're being shortchanged by the type of highways we have," he said. "But we'd be tickled pink if they were better."

And Schaefer said his organization was in favor of the fuel tax increase to help pay for these improvements. Now it's up to the state to make sure they go ahead as planned.

"Our wish right now is there is wise management and wise use of the new infrastructure funding," he said. "(Illinois) is the transportation hub of the Midwest and as a result we depend on infrastructure."

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