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## Atlantic Keeps On Trucking

*Small Business Plays Integral Role In Port's Vitality*

**B**y any measure, Maryland's Port of Baltimore is a huge economic engine, creating jobs and generating millions of dollars that flow back into the local, state and regional economies. So when major maritime contracts or significant port expansions are announced, it's often big news — exciting news — whose ripples touch national and international shores.

Big stories, of course, deserve big headlines, but across the Port, a myriad of small business owners and service providers share in and contribute to the Port's success.

"Small businesses fill vitally important niches in our local Port economy," explains Matthew Kachura, a University of Baltimore economist. They provide flexibility and expanded capabilities that allow large companies to concentrate on areas where they can achieve higher efficiencies; create jobs and generate dollars that economic development officials describe with terms like "multiplier effect" and "trickle-down economics" as they percolate throughout the local economy.

It's a win-win scenario that finds itself being played out daily in the port community. Ron Rebbel's story is one of many, but it serves as a good example of how small business fits into the bigger picture. Rebbel was born and raised in East Baltimore and has been involved in trucking ever since his discharge from the Navy in 1965. Twenty-three years ago, parlaying experience gained working for local companies picking up freight from the piers and



BY GARY HORNBACHER | Photography By Kathy Bergren Smith



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dealing with stevedores and freight forwarders, he went into business for himself.

Today, Rebbel owns two Dundalk-based companies — Atlantic Truck Services, which provides local and regional shipping, stripping, warehousing and just-in-time inventory management; and Atlantic Transportation Services, which duplicates many of the same services as ATS but substitutes brokered truck transportation to points as far away as Canada and Mexico.

That's an oversimplification, as a chat with Ron or son Todd, the firm's sales/marketing representative, quickly proves, but it helps set the focus for a prospering small business operation, that, like Ron, has grown up in the shadow of the Port.

"Baltimore's a good place to run this kind of business," says Ron Rebbel. "The Port generates a lot of business for us and when times are good for the Port they are good for Atlantic."

"We do import/export containers," Rebbel continues, "go in, pick up sea containers, loose freight, lumber and stuff like that and either deliver them to the ultimate customer or we bring it back to the warehouse, unload it and put it on one of our trailers and send it out to the Midwest or wherever the customer is."

And that's just one side of Atlantic Transportation's multifaceted brokerage/trucking/warehousing business. There are many others in each of those individual business sectors, says Rebbel, but he's only aware of a dozen or so local competitors who do all three.

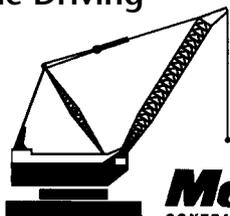
Rebbel, in fact, started the transportation brokerage side of his business more than two decades ago. Its premise is simple — finding freight for others to deliver, often when they would otherwise be returning to a destination empty after making a delivery. Sometimes it's freight in Atlantic's warehouse that is loaded and shipped out; more often he and his dispatchers are playing the role of long-distance marriage brokers, helping match client firms and truckers.

Easier said than done. Third-party logistical companies are neither shipper nor the trucker, but have become increasingly important facilitators.

Arranging head hauls (the front end

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of a pick-up and delivery) and back hauls (the return trip) is a highly competitive, 24/7 operation made easier by cell phones and fax machines, says Rebbel, but face-to-face relationships are still important.

"One of the new business focuses the firm has been working on," says Rebbel, "involves getting customers in the Midwest to bring their freight into Baltimore in a drayage container, stripping it and then shipping it out either piecemeal or as a full load of product."

Todd Rebbel, who recalls sweeping the warehouse and stripping containers when he was growing up, returned to work with his father three years ago after working elsewhere in industry marketing areas. Perhaps not so coincidentally, the firm's employee base has grown 200 percent over the same period and its number of wholly owned trucks — which the firm generally uses to serve clients in a 125-radius of the Port — has increased threefold.

Atlantic Transportation currently leases warehouse and upstairs office space in a cinderblock building located near the car entrance to Dundalk Marine Terminal. Being close to the piers and having yard space available is a plus in a business where miles and time are equally important.

So is running a tight ship.

"Atlantic occupies the upstairs portion of the building and the owner does my labor for me, unloads my containers and transloads, fixes my orders and gets them ready to be sent out," says Ron Rebbel.

"We are a lean company with no frills," adds Todd Rebbel. "Our payroll includes drivers, dispatchers, one bookkeeper and my father and I, and we outsource a lot."

That outsourcing includes strippers, forklift operators, laborers and truck mechanics, among others, underscoring the importance small businesses like Atlantic Transportation play locally.

It's all part of the Port's smooth working transportation chain.

"A business like this touches a lot of people," says Ron. "So, yes, the money we are spending for employees and trucks and [outsourcing] goes right back into the Baltimore economy." 🌐

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