

Ridley boss, First Nation leaders take ideas on road

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Ridley Terminals Inc. chairman Dan Veniez is warning those connected to the port of Prince Rupert that Chinese exports might slow and says it's time to be prudent about the local economy.

Veniez, who is on a trade mission to China along with Lax Kw'alaams elected chief John Helin and Gitksan lead treaty negotiator Elmer Derrick, said that the only negative he has encountered so far on his mission is the low awareness on the part of the Chinese business community about what the Northwest offers.

"We're telling the unique and exciting story of the competitive cost and service advantages of the Northwest corridor, the Port of Prince Rupert and Ridley Terminals.

"People are listening with great interest," Veniez said.

But he also says that business leaders in the Far East are feeling good about the Northwest's port.

"There are no concerns at all about the port and northern corridor. Quite the contrary," said Veniez through an email exchange with the Prince Rupert Daily News on Thursday.

"Their general reaction to Prince Rupert, the port, the corridor, and the investments Canada has made in supporting infrastructure is very positive."

Helin said that last month's protocol agreement with Ridley, "created the right environment to work with Mr. Veniez to promote Prince Rupert to the audience of Chinese business and political leaders.

"When they see the chairman of a major corporation with us, it sends a hugely positive signal. It gives our message even more credibility," added Helin.

Derrick, an RTI board member, said: "my message is that our community, and the Northwest as a whole, is an attractive place to invest and we're open for business.

"That's a major theme of all aboriginal leaders on this mission. There's a general impression that we're somehow not eager to do deals. We're here to dispel that notion."

Trade with China has become an increasing concern for port cities ever since the global markets fell into a financial crisis last month and consumer demand dropped in North America.

A weakening US dollar and Canadian loonie has lessened demand for Chinese goods, hurting the shipping industry.

Last month, the loonie dropped a record 12 per cent against the US dollar, the most since at least 1950, according to the Bank of Canada.

Another concerning indicator is the Baltic Dry Index, a service that tracks shipping commodities. The index was strong back in May but has dropped 90 per cent since then.

Veniez said that businessmen in the Far East want to increase business, but until the North American markets strengthen, locals should be realistic about international trade.

"They (the Chinese) are feeling the impact of weakening demand from the rest of the world.

"That means business will likely decrease, not increase, any time soon," said Veniez.

He added that the impact of the financial crisis has hit globally but that it was

too soon to tell, however, what the real impact would be on volumes coming to and from Prince Rupert.

"But I think prudence dictates that we brace ourselves for a major correction, batten down the hatches, and stay focused on finding ways to develop a competitive niche for the unique offerings of the Northwest."