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Nunavut Eastern Arctic Shipping Inc.

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## Arctic Visions: Suzanne Paquin sees the shipping needs of the North through clear eyes

September 18, 2015

by Carroll McCormick

The Canadian North is admittedly a harsh mistress, but the lack of marine infrastructure and oversight their borders on the otherworldly. There is a way forward, however, according to Suzanne Paquin, president and CEO of NEAS, which provides sealift services to scores of communities, mines and other clients in the North. In a densely packed nutshell, Paquin lays out the challenges, “We deliver an essential service under extreme conditions. All communities are dependent on marine re-supply however there is a huge lack of basic marine infrastructure. We have no ports, no wharves, no harbors, no ramps and no lighting, no safe or secure marine work areas on beaches, no safe anchorages or mooring buoys for our vessels, few navigational aids and very limited hydrographic charts.”

Paquin lives and breathes cargo and shipping. After graduating from McGill University with a Bachelor of Commerce degree in accounting and management information systems, she joined Logistec Corporation in 1983, and eventually became vice-president, operations in its shipping division, Logistec Navigation. She helped create Transport Nanuk, a joint venture between Logistec Corporation and The North West Company, served as Transport Nanuk’s president, and now runs the NEAS Group.

Paquin also sits on the board of directors for Logistec Corporation and has been a director for the St. Lawrence Ship Operators Association since 1990.

NEAS employs 150 people. Its administrative office is in Montreal. For 15 years now Valleyfield has been home base for its vessels and the NEAS Cargo Service Center. NEAS generally loads four vessels at least three times a year, but special projects require additional shipments.

NEAS operates five vessels, with a combined deadweight tonnage of 56,576 tons and 3,324 TEUs worth of container capacity. They ply the Northern waters during a four to five-month shipping window – roughly July to November.

Each ship carries a “kit” of portable port infrastructure. It includes tugboats, barges, forklifts, portable office, lighting and front-end loaders – indispensable for moving every stitch of cargo from ship to naked beach. Labouring during high tide in two-to four-hour shifts, crews require two weeks to do a job that would take three days at a wharf. “In Iqaluit we can lose six weeks of downtime [in a season],” Paquin says.

These portable ports double as unsupervised playgrounds and are magnets for eager townspeople.

In a Northern first, last year Iqaluit created a defined staging area under its Sealift Safety Program.

The absence of port facilities is a colossal boat anchor on the Northern economy. “The lack of marine infrastructure in the Arctic is a hidden tax on economic development in Nunavut,” Paquin explains. “This marine infrastructure deficit increases costs on all development, from housing, new construction to everyday pricing of everyday products required to sustain life.”

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“In the 1990s, the federal government, the provincial government and Makivik [Corporation] put in place a plan to bring marine infrastructure to each Nunavik community. They worked together and identified the needs. They prioritized and executed the plan. These are not fancy ports, but they are making things better incrementally,” Paquin says.

One might be awed by Ottawa’s late-July announcement that it will contribute up to \$64 million for a deepwater port in Iqaluit, but the cost, scope, timeline and even whether it will be built at all are nowhere near cast in concrete.

“Deep-draft ports and mega projects are expensive, especially in the North where the needs are so much. We’ve told [governments] what we need. We need to just work 24 hours a day,” Paquin says.

People in the south need more information about northern realities to better inform their decision-making, according to Paquin. “I started explaining sealift in 2008 and I was surprised how little people knew about how things worked in the North. People say ‘you’re working on a beach. No!’”

It would be an economical, and economic, leap from the 16th Century to the 21st merely to have the old causeway across from Iqaluit upgraded so ships can dock and unload in a normal fashion. “It is already here. It just needs to be ramped up,” Paquin says..

Lest one thinks that global warming and melting ice might make shipping easier, Paquin says, “Planning for having less ice in years going forward is not a good assessment. The weather and ice conditions have been more volatile than ever before. ”

NEAS has invested in larger ships, doubled capacity, does more voyages and is more efficient than ever, Paquin says. “We’ve invested ... come on it’s time for others to invest. The more people know and understand about the reality of remote communities in the Arctic, the more obvious the need for action becomes. We are seeing piecemeal investments in the Arctic. What we want to see is a global vision and leadership.”