“Win-win” solutions aren’t guaranteed.

Inland ports have become the latest intermodal “must have” for areas seeking industrial growth. In the last 10 years, real estate developers have sought to develop logistics parks all over North America, while some railroads have looked for “free” intermodal terminals. Neither have been able to replicate the success of the first two: Alliance and Elwood, Ill.

“Win-win” solutions aren’t guaranteed. Part of the problem has been a proliferation of real estate developers, local economic development agencies, and overly optimistic ports, all posturing as overnight “intermodal experts.” We should expect some rather embarrassing — and expensive — inland port disasters attributable to a weak understanding of intermodal’s asset-based, network-operating basis (Remember Stark County Neomodal?). In fact, the article highlighted the failure of Allen Group’s logistics park project in Dallas.

The Intermodal Expo last came to (Dallas) Texas in 1998, when intermodal was experiencing a self-induced downturn. At that event, a local music group opened for the Lawmen, Norfolk Southern’s country western band. Since then, intermodal, and that local group, The Dixie Chicks, have gone on to global fame and glory.

As the industry assembles this month in Houston, it might be worthwhile to consider Dr. Hook’s lyrics about “groupies, who’ll do anything we say.” The intermodal industry’s success has generated cheerleaders and groupies looking to make money “on” — rather than “in” — intermodal. Past results have been impressive, but future success likely will require more hard work.

Ted Prince is chief operating officer at Tiger Cool Express. Contact him at ted@tigercoolexpress.com.