

Ports

Germany's twin ports look to stop the rot

Bremen and Bremerhaven owners urge the government to help reverse the recent decline in shipowning



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GOOD news from the maritime centre of Bremen and Bremerhaven has been in short supply for some time.

In 2009, Hanjin closed Senator Lines, the local liner company set up in 1985. In 2010, ship lender Deutsche Schiffsbank decided to close its Bremen offices and only keep its presence in Hamburg.

However, the biggest blow to date came this year with the demise of Niels Stolberg, the 'golden boy' of Bremen's shipowning community and his company Beluga Shipping, self-proclaimed global market leader in the heavylift and project cargo segment.

Geographically, Bremen, as Germany's smallest state, is remarkable. It consists of the actual city of Bremen and its exclave, the city of Bremerhaven, which are 60 km apart.

Bremerhaven is home to Germany's second largest seaport and has continually trailed Hamburg when it comes to importance for the maritime industries.

Bremerhaven is the second-largest container hub in the country, but when it comes to shipowning, local owners compete with those from the Ems region for second place.

Now, owners are warning that the city should do more to make the location more attractive. "Bremen must acquire more appeal so that shipowners want to come and do business here," said Thorsten Mackenthun, chairman of the Bremen Shipowners Association, or Bremer Rhederverein, the local arm of the national industry group VDR.

He would also like to promote Bremen's ship register. The city should aim to register ships that are managed from Bremen, said Mr Mackenthun, who is managing partner of shipowning companies Hanseatic Lloyd and Hansa Mare.

At the moment half of the vessels affected are registered elsewhere, such as



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Hamburg or Haren/Ems, Mr Mackenthun said. Bremen owners blame the state government and its administration.

They complain that shipping companies are not being given the same perks as in other

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shipping centres. Thus, Bremen is losing potential tax revenue on shipping.

This is something that Bremen with its chronic financial problems cannot really afford. The jobless rate is high, as is the state's level of debt.

However, despite his criticism of the economic framework in Bremen, Mr Mackenthun defends the state.

Talking about the demise of Senator Lines, he said that Hanjin, which operates its European business from Hamburg, had good reasons for shutting down its subsidiary in Bremen as it had centralised its liner business in Hamburg.

He added that the same was true for the collapse of Beluga. However: "It is a fact that Bremen as a shipping centre has suffered due to the Beluga situation as regards to the number of ships operated from here."

Robert Völkl, managing director of Bremer Rhederverein added that the Bremen-controlled

fleet of vessels had been rising in recent years. This development ended only when Beluga collapsed.

At present, Bremer Rhederverein has 30 members.

There have been positive developments, too.

When Mr Mackenthun took over the helm of the local owners' association in 2007, he made it better known.

Under his auspices, owners committed themselves to the German flag and devised a pool solution to partly compensate for higher costs.

New shipping companies were set up, such as bulker owner Liberty One, which recently took delivery of its first vessel.

In addition, Bremen continues to be a hotspot for marine insurance.

The marine claims association Verein Hanseatischer Transportversicherer VHT has offices in Bremen, in addition to Hamburg. Well-known managing agent Lampe & Schwartz with its

huge marine book also has its headquarters here.

Peter Grönwoldt, managing director of Bremen-based owner Harren & Partner, which recently hit the news when it signed up Goldman Sachs as an investor for its offshore venture, named other factors that were important for the development of a maritime centre, such as the availability of good staff. Thus, it is positive that the University of Bremen offers a bachelor degree in Shipping & Chartering.

However, the next setback is looming: Hansa Heavy Lift, established from the remains of Beluga Shipping by investor Oaktree, may soon move to Hamburg.

Sources at Bremen's shipowners' association said they were expecting such a move, given the fact that the company did not apply for membership to the local organisation but was planning to become a member at the Hamburg-based VDR. ■