Interview with Per Fredman, VP of Sales and Marketing
& Member of the Management Team, the Port of Södertälje

Doing things smartly

by Przemysław Opłocki

Upon our recent visit to Södertälje, a uniquely positioned harbour just over 30 km from the Stockholm city centre, we spoke to Per Fredman about the seaport's future projects and expansion as well as its current challenges. Undeniably, with its minimal environmental impact, technological advances, and educational outreach, the port seems to be on the right track.

How did the port fare during the coronavirus pandemic?

We split everyone into 'white' and 'blue' colours to protect our workforce. The former worked every other day in the office (and every second day from home), and the next day, the other gang. We had meetings on Teams every morning together and later whenever necessary. We tried to do our best for our stevedores; we divided the room where they had their lunches and breakfasts, so drivers had one part of the room, and the rest of the staff had the other. And we tried to divide lunchtime and breakfast time if possible. Also, the crane drivers are not allowed to go in the buses – they had to walk because they were very difficult to replace in terms of a workforce.

Speaking about that human factor, how difficult or easy is it to find port workers, especially when we are talking about stevedores and drivers?

I think it had been easier before. We are now hiring stevedores again, so let's see how that goes. Hopefully, it will be easy, but at the same time, you want the right people, with the proper attitude, preferably with some experience, perhaps on a forklift, in the warehouse, or something in that fashion. The rest we can teach, like driving a crane – that is something we have to do because we don't just send anybody to operate the container cranes; that would be too dangerous.
But we also cooperate with local schools if they have pupils in need of workplace experience. When dealing with programmes in logistics, schools can contact us, and if we have the time, if possible, we will do it. Recently, after this type of programme, we employed two girls and one guy; they have all gone through this logistics programme. It is vital to take care of those seeking education in the field of logistics. We try, but we are a relatively small organisation, so we can't manage too much. Still, our results are promising.

If someone starts to work in the port or the office, do they stay there for a long time?

Nowadays, they remain for shorter periods. It is a change since the former generation when working in one place for a lifetime was customary. The younger generation will not stay that long. But, what is worth noting is that if you don't have formal education, this is a pretty well-paid job, comparatively speaking. You have a fair chance to get extra work in addition to reasonable working hours, access to neat facilities, and friendship for good measure. So, it is easy to stay.

And when looking at statistics, how did you perform in H1 2022 compared to the pandemic period? What is the outlook for year-end?

It is slightly better, not too much, because we did not suffer too much due to COVID-19. We are the closest cargo port to the Stockholm area so we could stay busy. We tried and managed to balance it all out pretty well. But now, the first half of 2022 has been even better. So, the figures are in black and following the budgets, so we are pretty happy.

How has the link between Södertälje and Riga been doing?

It takes time to build up a new line. The numbers are promising, and Scandic Line seems to have enough muscle to keep on. So, let us see what happens this autumn, as we are hopeful to see some progress.
We also notice much promise from the new concrete elements factory in Riga. We expect shipments of some 20-30 trailers per week, so that is fantastic. And there is much more to come, but it isn't easy to foresee it right now. We are very optimistic, and I believe we will see more volume coming.
What is lacking right now is this customs filter so that passengers or drivers can move without problems and delays. We will soon have it in place, easing up the sales from Scandic Line. We are working on it, though, with an actionplan.

You have handled some 'unusual' cargo, like prefabricated housing modules. Can you share the logistics details of how challenging it is to take care of such project cargo?

We look for many infrastructure projects that are good business for us. We have cargo such as bridge elements, steel pipes, house modules, and other construction materials. This type of freight is what we would like to be able to help our customers and their clients with. It also depends a bit on the situation in the port and the cargo flow. We are never full, as we say, but from time to time, we have to be clever with the space in the port.
The housing modules, manufactured in Malaysia, came from the Swedish company SIBS which builds rental apartments, and it seems they do good business because they are shipping in a lot more modules. And today, we managed to get a deal where we will load modules for the first time. We have always just offloaded and realised it is a more difficult task to load. So, that will be interesting.

Are the modules concrete or wood?

Both actually. The bottom is concrete, quite heavy compared to other modules. And thanks to having this concrete platform, we can utilise this specially built spreader to move such heavy modules. The spreader is not automatic – it is manual in many ways. It is very, very tough to move. But it's conducive because it is restricted here in Sweden – you cannot work at very high heights. So, when you have two layers on top of a vessel, you can use this spreader and stay consistent with regulations. Otherwise, you have two cranes and one working platform, which costs you two crane drivers and two cranes rather than one. So, this works for us. Our people are looking to do it in a more automated way, and I hope they manage.

So, is it also suitable to take the standard 40-foot container?

Yes, it is. Still, we never use it for standard containers; the spreader is too hard to work with. But still, it is good to have it because, for example, you could put them two-high or three-high if needed. But if we didn't have the spreader, we wouldn't be able to do it due to the restrictions about working at high heights. Sometimes, you have to adapt.









Photos: Port of Södertälje

■ ***What is the port doing across the IT/digital and sustainability fronts, especially since one of Södertälje's goals is to be one of Sweden's greenest ports? And also, what are some of the tools with which you want to make that happen?***

Well, it has already happened. We have a fossil-free machine park where we drive HVO 100, even now, while it is costly. We use renewable electricity for all our machines. That's quite a big step. Additionally, we have solar panels atop our warehouse – the biggest we could build, we built. We supply approximately 25% of our needs via solar panels. And, of course, we have LEDs in the system.
Also, preferably, we work with projects that bring cargo from the road to the sea – if that can be done, we are eager to attend or partake in the project. For instance, recently we transported steel pipes via barges into the Stockholm city centre which otherwise would have had to be done via roads. So, we are always on the lookout for these kinds of projects.

■ ***What is the current status of the Bio-CCS project?***

The Swedish government will provide subsidies to players investing in bio-CCS facilities, capturing, separating and storing CO_2 from renewable sources. A reverse auction will determine which players can perform bio-CCS at the lowest cost, with companies bidding on how much CO_2 they can capture. The winner of the tender receives the support. The first auction is taking place at the end of 2022. It takes about three years to organise the project, so the storage and support payment might not occur before 2026.

■ ***What is the WorkIT app?***

It is a mobile application developed by Hogia Terminal System, which provides terminals & ports with logistical handling systems. This application can be used for scanning cars, keeping track of strip/stuff, reefer temperatures, etc.

■ ***What are Södertälje's ongoing and future port development plans?***

It is electrifying the rails into the port and rebuilding the rail tracks for smarter and quicker movements. We do not need very long rail tracks; it makes more sense for us to build more but shorter tracks.
And also, in the future, we would like to have a dolphin set up some 50-60 m south of quay 13 to receive longer vessels. We also need to renovate quay 12. Additionally, we will install more solar panels, and we have to renew our machine park.
Space, of course, is what is most important to be able to grow. Therefore, we would like to continue developing a more efficient logistical flow when receiving a whole load of cars from a ro-ro vessel while saving some space in the port. We want to grow, but we want to do it smartly.

■ ***What is happening around the seaport transport & logistics, particularly the Stockholm SYD project?***

We are trying to market in this area because we see ourselves as a unique selling point for the project due to our positioning. Many companies want a port close by.
At the end of the day, the expansion is tremendous right now. It took a long time to get it going, but now it is happening. So, in total, lots of new buildings and companies are getting established right now in the area, and we have just seen the beginning. I expect to see even more businesses move to the area because of the project, as it happened in similar situations. And I can see that this region will provide and supply 'the ring' of Stockholm from the south: on land (including by rail) and sea. So, I expect a lot from the Stockholm SYD project. A lot.

■ ***What stands behind the 'Stockholm Gateway' name?***

I came up with it because I think Södertälje – if you are out there globally, it is not easy to market. And we always try to emphasise our location, which is fantastic for this area. Södertälje is absolutely a great connection. We are the closest cargo port to the Stockholm city centre (some 30 km), which makes the location exceptional with its roads, rail, and waterways. And now, with Stockholm SYD, we are moving even closer to the capital, hence the Stockholm Gateway. Also, the harbour fuel facilities in Stockholm will be decommissioned. We are prepared to handle all the volumes currently imported for the area. Our fairway will get deeper and straighten to make the voyage safer for future tankers. ■