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China trade hot topic for January roundtable

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How to get a slow boat from China to make regular stops in Jacksonville will be among the topics at the Business Outlook in China breakfast roundtable next Friday at the University of North Florida's University Center.

The program begins at 8 a.m. and features panelists on trading with China, the fastest growing overseas market.

The economies of many other countries are stagnating, but China's economy has grown by 8 percent a year for more than a decade, said attorney **Jim Valenti, who leads World Trade Group**, an affiliate of Rogers, Towers, Bailey, Jones & Gay law firm.

"If you're looking to export, how can you ignore a country with five times the population of the U.S.?" Valenti said. "The purpose of our seminar is to educate local businesses about the opportunities and pitfalls."

China, with 1 billion people, is "by leaps and bounds moving toward a capitalistic society," Valenti said; however, some business sectors are closed to outsiders. "You don't just walk into China and open shop; you do it with the aid of people who have done it before.

"A lot of folks are intimidated about doing business in China because it's so foreign to what they're used to."

China is something we're all working on, we're all partnering on," said George Banks, who leads the international development office of the Jacksonville Economic Development Commission.

Trade with China is increasing at many East Coast ports, mostly because of labor problems at West Coast ports, said Roy Schleicher, Jaxport senior director of trade development and marketing. But so far, Jacksonville is missing out.

Most of the 8 percent of shipping through Jaxport docks are cars from Japan and South Korea, but almost all of the non-automobile shipping from Asia is from China, Schleicher said. "We're working with several steamship lines, trying to entice them to come in here."

A big step would be getting at least one of China's two major shipping lines to have a ship make regular calls here.

"A lot of people here are ready to trade with China," Banks said, including more than a few Northeast Florida manufacturers that have goods they would like to ship there if they could avoid the added costs of trucking the goods to another port.