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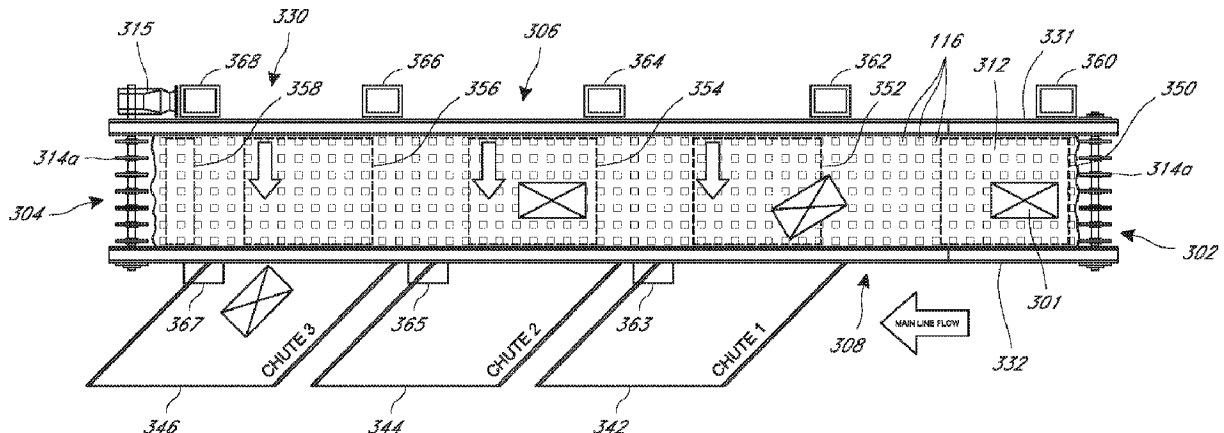


FIG. 4

(57) **Abrégé/Abstract:**

A modular transfer system with a primary flow system and a diverter system that is repositionable along a track system. The primary flow system includes a primary flow belt for conveying an article along a primary flow path from an infeed side of the modular transfer system to a pass-through side of the modular transfer system. The diverter system that is repositionable along the track system between the infeed side and the pass-through side by attachment within one or more channels.

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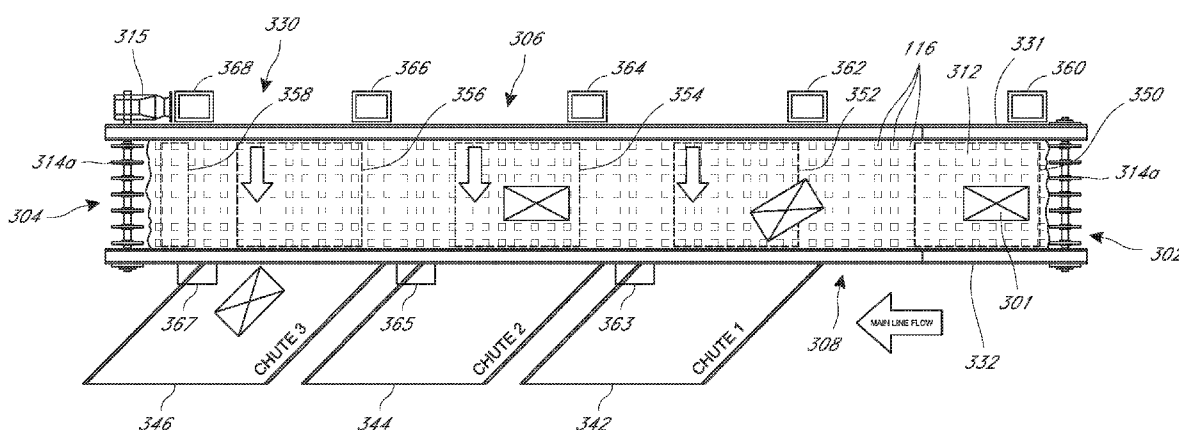


FIG. 4

(57) **Abstract:** A modular transfer system with a primary flow system and a diverter system that is repositionable along a track system. The primary flow system includes a primary flow belt for conveying an article along a primary flow path from an infeed side of the modular transfer system to a pass-through side of the modular transfer system. The diverter system that is repositionable along the track system between the infeed side and the pass-through side by attachment within one or more channels.

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MODULAR SORTATION UNITS, SYSTEMS, AND METHODS

CROSS REFERENCE

[0001] This application claims the priority benefit under at least 35 U.S.C. § 119 of U.S. Patent Application No. 62/590,233 filed November 22, 2017, the entirety of which is hereby incorporated by reference.

BACKGROUND

Field

[0002] The present disclosure relates to systems and methods for conveying goods from a first location to a second location. More specifically, some aspects of the present disclosure relate to modular conveyor components that can transfer goods to other components of a conveyor system.

Description of Certain Related Art

[0003] Conveyors can be used in various commercial and manufacturing applications to transport articles between different processing stations and locations. A conveyor typically includes a conveyor belt or chain that is arranged in an endless loop and driven to transport the articles on the belt or chain surface along a generally horizontal path.

SUMMARY OF CERTAIN FEATURES

[0004] This disclosure encompasses various embodiments of a modular transfer unit and related methods. In some embodiments, the modular transfer unit can include a main belt and a diverter system that can be repositioned relative to the main belt. In certain embodiments, the diverter system can be mounted on and slidable relative to a track system. In certain embodiments, the diverter system can be repositioned along the track system without removing the diverter system therefrom. These embodiments can provide the advantages of making the modular transfer unit easily customizable and reconfigurable.

[0005] In another aspect of certain embodiments, the modular transfer unit can include one or more filler sheets. The filler sheets can fill or span gaps between diverter systems or ends of the modular transfer unit. In certain embodiments, the filler sheets engage lower portions of movable members on the main belt. The filler sheets can provide an increased speed for articles travelling on the main belt and engaged with upper portions of the movable members. In certain implementations, the filler sheets can be coated in a sound

absorbing material. The sound absorbing filler can reduce noise created by operation of the modular sorting system.

[0006] In another aspect of certain embodiments, the modular transfer unit can include a control system. The control system can automatically operate the modular transfer unit in response to reconfiguration of the diverter system on the track system. In one embodiment, the control system can automatically detect the reconfiguration of the diverter system. In another embodiment, the control system can prompt a user to input updated parameters that reflect the reconfiguration of the diverter system. The control system can provide the advantages of being easily reconfigurable in the field and with minimal user training and minimal or no programming support.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0007] These and other features, aspects and advantages are described below with reference to the drawings, which are intended to illustrate non-limiting example embodiments of modular transfer units.

[0008] Figure 1 is a top down schematic of an embodiment of a modular transfer unit.

[0009] Figure 2A is a partial cross-sectional schematic of the modular transfer unit of Figure 1.

[0010] Figure 2B is another partial cross-sectional schematic of the modular transfer unit of Figure 1.

[0011] Figure 3 is a perspective view of an embodiment of a modular transfer unit.

[0012] Figure 4 is a top down schematic view of the modular transfer unit.

[0013] Figure 5 is a top down schematic view of the modular transfer unit having a main belt removed for clarity.

[0014] Figure 6 is a cross-section of the modular transfer unit at a diverter system.

[0015] Figure 7 is a cross-section of the modular transfer unit at a filler sheet.

[0016] Figure 8 shows the modular transfer unit having a control system.

[0017] Figure 9 shows a reconfiguration of the modular transfer unit.

[0018] Figure 10 is a top down schematic of another modular transfer unit.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF CERTAIN EMBODIMENTS

[0019] Various modular transfer units are disclosed. The modular transfer units can be utilized in a conveyor system which can have other conveying devices, such as belted conveyors and/or roller conveyors, which can convey articles as well as receptacles which can receive the conveyed articles at desired locations. The modular transfer units may be self-contained devices which beneficially allow the modular transfer unit to be selectively used in or removed from a conveyor system, or moved around a conveyor system on an as-needed basis. The modular transfer units may be stand-alone devices (e.g., self-supporting and/or not physically secured to other components of the conveyor system). The modular transfer units described herein can have a rectangular shape with four sides. This geometry may allow the modular transfer unit to be more widely implemented in current commercial conveyor systems. However, it is to be understood that the modular transfer unit can have different shapes with a different number of sides (e.g., pentagon with five sides, hexagon with six sides, circular, etc.).

[0020] The modular transfer units described herein can receive articles from other components of a conveyor system. In some embodiments, the modular transfer unit can allow the article to “pass through” the modular transfer unit such that the article is allowed to continue along its “primary flow path”. That is, the modular transfer unit conveys the article to a component of the conveyor system which is positioned opposite of the component from which the modular transfer unit received the article. This may occur with little to no change in direction for the article.

[0021] In some embodiments, the modular transfer unit can divert the article from this “primary flow path”. That is, the modular transfer unit redirects the article to a component of the conveyor system which is not positioned opposite of the component from which the modular transfer unit received the article. This may occur with a significant change in direction for the article. For example, as will be shown in the embodiments below, this may cause a generally perpendicular (e.g., about 90 degree) shift in direction for the article; however, it is to be understood that lower degrees of shift (e.g., less than or equal to about: 30 degrees, 45 degrees, 60 degrees, 75 degrees, 90 degrees, etc.) are contemplated.

[0022] For purposes of this disclosure, the modular transfer units will be described as having a single infeed side, a single pass-through side, and one or more divert

sides. This would be applicable in circumstances in which the modular transfer unit is utilized in a conveyor system which provides articles to the modular transfer unit at a single location. However, it is to be understood that the modular transfer unit can be utilized in conveyor systems having other configurations and which may provide articles to the modular transfer unit at multiple locations. In such circumstances, the modular transfer unit can have multiple infeed sides. Moreover, the pass-through sides may be a divert side or vice versa (depending on the specific location at which the modular transfer unit receives an article).

[0023] While the present description sets forth specific details of various embodiments, it will be appreciated that the description is illustrative only and should not be construed in any way as limiting. Additionally, although particular embodiments may be disclosed or shown in the context of conveyor systems which convey articles, it is to be understood that the systems described herein can be utilized with any other types of items, goods or articles. As such, the terms articles, packages, articles, goods, and items may be used interchangeably. For example, any component, structure, step, method, or material that is illustrated and/or described in one embodiment can be omitted or can be used with or instead of any component, structure, step, method, or material this is illustrated and/or described in another embodiment.

Overview of a Modular Transfer Unit

[0024] With reference to Figures 1 and 2, a schematic of a modular transfer unit 100 is illustrated. With reference first to Figure 1, the modular transfer unit 100 can have an infeed side 102 at which the modular transfer unit 100 can receive one or more articles from a conveyor system. In some implementations, the modular transfer unit 100 can be attached to components of a conveyor system which deliver the articles to the infeed side 102 of the modular transfer unit 100. The modular transfer unit 100 can allow articles to pass through the modular transfer unit 100 in a primary flow path (e.g., in a direction along the x-axis). The modular transfer unit 100 can have a pass-through side 104 at which the modular transfer unit 100 can discharge articles which are intended to be passed through the modular transfer unit 100. In some implementations, the modular transfer unit 100 can be attached to components of a conveyor system which receive the articles discharged from the pass-through side 104.

[0025] The modular transfer unit 100 can redirect or divert articles from the primary flow path. The modular transfer unit 100 can have a first divert side 106 and/or a second divert side 108 at which the modular transfer unit 100 can discharge articles which are intended to be diverted by the modular transfer unit 100. In some implementations, the first divert side 106 and/or the second divert side 108 of the modular transfer unit 100 can be attached to components of a conveyor system which receive the articles which have been diverted from the primary flow path of the conveyor system.

[0026] The modular transfer unit 100 can include a first conveyance system 110. The first conveyance system 110, which can be a primary flow system, can move articles along a direction of the primary flow path (e.g., in a direction along the x-axis). As shown, the primary flow system 110 can include a primary flow belt 112 (also called a main belt). The primary flow belt 112 can extend between the infeed side 102 and the pass-through side 104 of the modular transfer unit 100. The primary flow system 110 can include a driver 114, such as a motor, which can be directly coupled to the primary flow belt 112 or indirectly coupled via one or more intermediate components, such as gears. The driver 114 can move the primary flow belt 112 in a direction from the infeed side 102 to the pass-through side 104 of the modular transfer unit 100. In some embodiments, the driver 114 can move the primary flow belt 112 in a direction from the pass-through side 104 to the infeed side 102 of the modular transfer unit 100. The driver 114 can be reversible or intermediate components between the driver 114 and the primary flow belt 112 can allow the driver 114 to drive the primary flow belt 112 in reverse (e.g., a transmission with one or more gears).

[0027] In some embodiments, the primary flow belt 112 can be a roller-top belt, such as the 2253RT belt (available from System Plast S.r.l.). The primary flow belt 112 can include any feature or combination of features that are the same, or similar to, those described in any of U.S. Patent No. 7,021,454, issued April 4, 2006, U.S. Patent Application Publication No. 2018/0257872, filed March 8, 2018, and U.S. Patent Application Publication No. 2018/0257110, filed March 8, 2018, each of which are incorporated by reference herein in their entirety. In some embodiments, the primary flow belt 112 can have a length, measured from the infeed side 102 to the pass-through side 104 of between about 30" to about 250". The primary flow belt 112 can have a width, measured in the conveying plane and generally orthogonal to the length, of between about 16" to about 34". The driver 114

can be coupled to the primary flow belt 112 via a roller, lagged roller, sprocket or other torque transmission feature. The primary flow belt 112 can comprise a plurality of interconnected modules, such as plastic belt modules comprising a body and one or more movable components. Modules that are adjacent to each other in the conveying direction can be hingedly connected, such as with a hinge pin.

[0028] With continued reference to Figure 1, the modular transfer unit 100 can include one or more additional conveyance systems such as a diverter system 120a. The diverter system 120a can move articles in a direction which is non-parallel to the primary flow path of the conveyor system. For example, the diverter system 120a can move articles in a direction not parallel to the x-axis. As shown in the illustrated embodiment, the diverter system 120a can move articles in a direction which is generally orthogonal to the primary flow path of the conveyor system (e.g., the diverter system 120 can move articles in a direction along the y-axis) or in another direction.

[0029] The diverter system 120a can include a diverter belt 122a. The diverter belt 122a can extend from the first divert side 106 and/or the second divert side 108 of the modular transfer unit 100. The diverter belt 122a can overlap at least partially with the primary flow belt 112. The diverter system 120a can include a driver 124a, such as a motor, which can be directly coupled to the diverter belt 122a or indirectly coupled via one or more intermediate components, such as a transmission. The driver 124a can move the diverter belt 122a in a direction between the second divert side 108 and the first divert side 106 of the modular transfer unit 100. The driver 124a can be reversible or intermediate components between the driver 124a and the diverter belt 122a can allow the driver 124a to drive the diverter belt 122a in reverse.

[0030] In some embodiments, the diverter belt 122a comprises a non-modular belt, such as a fabric conveyor belt. In certain embodiments, the diverter belt 122a can be a Habasit NSW-5ELAV. In some variants, the diverter belt 122a comprises a plurality of interconnected modules, such as plastic belt modules. Modules that are adjacent each other in the conveying direction can be hingedly connected, such as with a hinge pin. The driver 124a can be coupled to the diverter belt 122a via a roller. In some implementations, the roller can be a 1.9" diameter roller.

[0031] The modular transfer unit 100 can include one or more filler sheets 120b. The filler sheets 120b can partially or substantially completely span one or more gaps beneath the primary flow belt 112 in the modular transfer unit 100. A gap can be located anywhere along the primary flow belt 112 where the belt 112 is unsupported by the driver 114 or the diverter system 120. The filler sheet 120b can engage with lower portions of the movable components. The filler sheets 120b can be substantially stationary. For example, in some implementations, the filler sheets 120b are substantially stationary relative to the surrounding environment, the diverter system 120a, and/or a frame that supports the filler sheets and 120b and/or the primary flow belt 112. In various embodiments, the filler sheets 120b are not driven and/or do not contact the conveyed articles. In some implementations, the filler sheet 120b can include a bonded friction coating on a top side.

[0032] In certain embodiments, the filler sheet 120b can comprise (e.g., be coated with) a sound absorbing material. Such a filler sheet 120b can reduce noise created by operation of the modular sorting system. In some implementations, the sound absorbing material comprises a fabric, a fiber-reinforced plastic, a rubber, or otherwise. In certain variants, the filler sheets 120b comprise a generally rigid layer (e.g., metal or wood or plastic, such as steel or plywood or acrylic) and a sound absorbing layer that comprises the sound absorbing material. The sound absorbing layer can be on the top and/or bottom of the generally rigid layer. In some embodiments, the sound absorbing layer is sufficiently tough and/or resilient to withstand substantially constant engagement with primary flow belt 112.

[0033] With continued reference to Figure 1, the modular transfer unit 100 can include a frame 130 that can be used to support one or more components of the modular transfer unit 100. The frame 130 can support components of the primary flow system 110 and the diverter system 120a, and the filler sheet 120b. The modular transfer unit 100 can be a standalone, self-contained system capable of operating separately from a conveyor system. The frame 130 can be coupled with a conveyor system. In some implementations, the frame 130 can be sized to fit between components of a conveyor system. This can beneficially allow the modular transfer unit 100 to be implemented on an as-needed basis in a conveyor system. In doing so, the modular transfer unit 100 can be swapped from one position in a conveyor system to another position in the conveyor system depending on the needs of the operator. In some implementations, the frame 130 can be sized to be retrofitted to existing

conveyor systems. The frame 130 can be assembled together of shorter frame components or frame modules.

[0034] The frame 130 can include a track system. The track system can include first and second tracks, 131, 132. The first and second tracks 131, 132 can be disposed on opposite sides of the frame 130. The first track 131 can be generally aligned on the first divert side 106. The second track 132 can be generally aligned along the second divert side 108. The tracks 131, 132 can extend between the in-feed side 102 and the pass-through side 104 of the modular transfer unit 100. The tracks 131, 132 can each be formed of a unitary structure. In other implementations, the tracks 131, 132 can be modular and assembled together of shorter length track modules.

[0035] The tracks 131, 132 can include one or more channels. The channels can extend lengthwise (between the in-feed side 102 and the pass-through side 104) on the frame 130. The tracks 131, 132 can be formed by an extrusion process to form therein the channels. The channels can extend substantially the length of the tracks 131, 132. In one implementation, the first and second tracks 131, 132 can comprise extruded aluminum.

[0036] The diverter system 120a and/or the filler sheet 120b can be mounted with the channels in the first and second tracks 131, 132. The diverter system 120a and/or the filler sheet 120b can be slidable along the channels or fixed with the channels to reconfigure the modular transfer unit 100. The diverter system 120a and/or the filler sheet 120b can be attached with the channels by one or more bolts, clamps, couplers, or other mechanical coupler.

[0037] The diverter system 120a and/or the filler sheet 120b can be repositionable along the tracks. The channels can enable the diverter system 120a and/or the filler sheet 120b to be mountable at various positions between the in-feed side 102 and the pass-through side 104. This can have the advantage of making the modular transfer unit 100 customizable by a user. An advantage of the modular transfer unit 100 is the ability to easily move the diverter system 120a and/or the filler sheet 120b in the field. When issues occur during the design phase and in the field, the modular construction of the modular transfer unit 100 makes quick work of being able to adapt the system according to usage requirements. In several embodiments, the diverter system 120a and/or the filler sheet 120b can be repositioned while remaining connected to the frame 130. For example, in some

embodiments, the diverter system 120a and/or the filler sheet 120b can be repositioned along the tracks while remaining connected to the tracks (e.g., not physically separated from, or not disconnected and then reconnected).

[0038] The driver 114 and/or the primary flow belt 112 can be mounted to the tracks 131, 132. The tracks 131, 132 can be mounted or installed on the frame 130. The frame 130 can provide rigidity and support to the tracks 131, 132 and the primary flow belt 112.

[0039] With reference next to Figure 2A, a schematic of the primary flow belt 112 and the diverter belt 122a of the modular transfer unit 100 is illustrated. As shown, the primary flow belt 112 can be positioned above the diverter belt 122a. Movable components 116 of the primary flow belt 112 can contact the diverter belt 122a. The movable components 116 can have one or more translational and/or rotational degrees of freedom. For example, the movable components 116 can be in the form of balls which provide three rotational degrees of freedom. As another example, the movable components 116 can be in the form of rollers which provide one degree of rotational freedom.

[0040] The movable components 116 can move in response to movement of the primary flow belt 112 and/or the diverter belt 122a. As shown in the illustrated embodiment, the movable components 116 can rotate about the x-axis (represented by arrow 118) in response to translation of the diverter belt 122a in a direction along the y-axis (represented by arrow 126). An article (not shown) positioned on the primary flow belt 112 and contacting the movable components 116 could thereby translate in a direction along the y-axis. This can allow the diverter belt 122a to redirect or divert articles in a direction which is generally orthogonal to the primary flow path. In several embodiments, when the movable components 116 pass over the diverter belt 122a, the movable components 116 are in continuous contact with the diverter belt 122a. In some implementations, the diverter belt 122a is vertically fixed relative to the primary flow belt 112. For example, in some embodiments, the diverter belt 122a as a whole does not move up and down and/or into and out of engagement with the movable components 116. In some embodiments, the diverter belt 122a is maintained in constant contact with and/or is continuously engaged with (e.g., abutted against) at least one of the movable components 116, such as the protruding lower portion of at least one spherical ball. In certain embodiments, the primary flow belt 112 does

not include one or more motors that rotate the movable components 116 relative to other of the movable components 116 and/or a base of the primary flow belt in which the movable components 116 are journaled.

[0041] Figure 2B is a section taken at 90 degrees relative to the section of Figure 2A. The primary flow belt 112 can be positioned above the filler sheet 120b and/or the diverter belt 122a. The primary flow belt 112 can move at a main belt speed relative to the filler sheet 120b and/or the diverter belt 122a. Lower portions of the movable components 116 of the primary flow belt 112 can contact the filler sheet 120b and/or the diverter belt 122a. The movable components 116 can move in response to movement of the primary flow belt 112 over the filler sheet 120b. As shown in the illustrated embodiment, the movable components 116 can rotate about the y-axis (represented by arrow 119) in response to interaction with the filler sheet 120b and/or the diverter belt 122a. An article (not shown) positioned on the primary flow belt 112 and contacting the movable components 116 could thereby translate in a direction along the x-axis or along the primary flow direction. An article (not shown) positioned on the primary flow belt 112 and contacting the movable components 116 could thereby translate in a direction along the primary flow direction relative to the primary flow belt 112. The article can translate at a conveyance speed. The conveyance speed can be double that of the main belt speed.

[0042] In some embodiments, the filler sheets 120b assist in maintaining a substantially constant conveyance speed of the conveyed article. As discussed above, when the movable components 116 are in contact with the diverter belt 122a, the article can be conveyed at a speed that is greater than the speed of the primary flow belt 112 due to the additional velocity provided by the rotation of the movable components 116. However, when the movable components 116 are not in contact with the diverter belt 122a, the conveyed speed in such a region of the primary flow belt 112 can drop to that of the speed of the primary flow belt 112. This change in conveyance speed may be undesirable, such as because it may result in unintended movement of the article relative to the belt 112, reduced ability to track the location of the article, and/or increased difficulty in handing the article. In some embodiments, the filler sheets 120b can substantially or completely fill a gap, such as between a first diverter belt 122a and a second diverter belt 122a, thereby maintaining the rotation of the movable components 116. This can result in the conveyance speed of the

article remaining substantially constant. In various embodiments of the modular transfer unit 100, the conveyed speed of the article is substantially constant along the length of the modular transfer unit 100. In some variants of the modular transfer unit 100, the conveyed article on the primary flow belt 112 does not experience a sudden change in speed as an article passes into or out of a region in which the movable components 116 are in contact with the diverter belt 122a. In several embodiments of the modular transfer unit 100, the movable components 116 on the article conveying side (e.g., the top side, not the return side) of the primary belt 112 remain in motion (e.g., rotation) throughout the length of the modular transfer unit 100. In some implementations, a substantially constant speed indicates a maximum change in speed of approximately 10%. The filler sheet 120b can comprise a unitary sheet, or a plurality of individual sheets that together form the filler sheet 120b.

[0043] While the modular transfer unit 100 was described as having a single infeed side 102, a single pass-through side 104, and two divert sides 106, 108, it is to be understood that fewer or greater number of sides may be used (e.g., five or more sides). Moreover, it is to be understood that the modular transfer unit 100 can include two infeed sides and two discharge/divert sides. For example, the modular transfer unit 100 may receive articles at sides 102, 106. Articles received at side 102 may be discharged at side 104 or diverted to side 108. Articles received at side 106 may be discharged at side 108 or diverted to side 104. The modular aspect of the modular transfer unit 100 can beneficially allow the modular transfer unit 100 to be implemented in a wide variety of conveyance systems.

[0044] With reference next to Figure 3, an embodiment of a modular transfer unit 200 is illustrated. The modular transfer unit 200 can include components, features, and/or functionality which are the same or similar to those of other modular transfer units described herein, such as modular transfer unit 100 described above. The modular transfer unit 200 can include a primary flow belt 212. The primary flow belt 212 can comprise a modular conveyor belt, such as a belt made of hingedly-connected belt modules (e.g., links). The primary flow belt 212 can include multiple movable components 216 in the form of spherical balls. The primary flow belt 212 can be operated via one or more drivers, such as motorized rollers (not shown). Components of the modular transfer unit 200 can be supported by a frame 230. This can allow the modular transfer unit 200 to be swapped in and out of a conveyor system on an as-needed basis.

Example of a Modular Transfer Unit

[0045] Figure 4 shows a modular transfer unit 300. Similar to the modular transfer units 100 and 200, the modular transfer unit 300 can include an infeed side 302 and a pass-through side 304. A main belt 312 (shown in partial cut-away) can extend from the infeed side 302 to the pass-through side 304. The main belt 312 can include a plurality of hingedly-connected belt modules. The belt modules can together form a loop. The loop can have an article conveying side and a return side. The belt modules can include a body. A plurality of the movable components 116 can be rotatably mounted within the body. An upper portion of the movable components 116 can protrude above an upper surface of the body and a lower portion can protrude below a lower surface of the body.

[0046] A driver 314 can be mounted on the infeed side 302, the pass-through side 304 or elsewhere on the main belt 312. A second driver 314a can be mounted opposite the driver 314. The driver 314 can be coupled with a motor 315. The coupling with the motor 315 can include a transmission for transmitting a torque of the motor to the driver 314. The main belt 312 can be looped over the drivers 314, 314a. Application of a torque to the driver 314 can rotate the driver 314 and thereby translate the main belt 312 in a primary flow direction from the infeed side 302 towards the pass-through side 314. The drivers 314, 314a can be sprockets, rollers, lagged rollers, or other engagement members. The motor 315 can be included with a gearbox or transmission.

[0047] At or adjacent to the infeed side 302, the modular transfer unit 300 can include an infeed detection zone 350. The infeed detection zone 350 can be associated with an article sensor 360. At or adjacent to the pass-through side 304, the modular transfer unit 300 can include a pass-through detection zone 358. The pass-through detection zone 358 can be associated with an article sensor 368.

[0048] At different points along the main belt 312 between the infeed and pass-through sides 302, 304, the modular transfer unit 300 can include one or more divert zones. The modular transfer unit 300 includes first, second, and third divert zones 352, 354, 356, although a greater or lesser number may be included in the modular transfer unit 300. The divert zones 352, 354, 356 can be aligned with one or more diverter systems, as discussed further below.

[0049] The divert zones 352, 354, 356 can be associated with one or more article sensors. The article sensors can include sensors 362, 364, and 366. The article sensors can be one-dimensional (e.g., linear) across the primary flow belt 312. The article sensors can define or align with a leading edge of the divert zones 352, 354, 356 and/or the detection zones 350, 358. In some embodiments, the article sensors can be a photo-eye. However, it is to be understood that other types of sensors can be utilized, such as optical sensors, electromagnetic sensors, weight sensors, and other types of sensors. Moreover, although the detection zones of the illustrated embodiment are linear in the plane of the primary flow belt 312, it is to be understood that the detection zones can be two-dimensional in the plane of the primary flow belt 312 and/or three-dimensional.

[0050] The divert zones 352, 354, 356 can be aligned with one or more divert chutes. The divert chutes can include first, second, and third chutes 342, 344, 346. As shown, the first, second, and third divert zones 352, 354, 356 align with first, second, and third chutes 342, 344, 346, respectively. The divert chutes 342, 344, 346 can be other conveyor units, other modular transfer units, roller take-away units, catch-baskets, or other components of a conveyor system. Although illustrated on only one side of the main belt 312, the divert chutes 342, 344, 346 can be aligned on either side thereof.

[0051] The chutes 342, 344, 346 can be associated with one or more article sensors. The article sensors can include sensors 363, 365, and 367. The article sensors can be one-dimensional (e.g., linear) across the chutes 342, 344, 346, or multi-dimensional. In some embodiments, the article sensors can be formed by a photo-eye. However, it is to be understood that other types of sensors can be utilized, such as optical sensors, electromagnetic sensors, weight sensors, and other types of sensors.

[0052] In some embodiments, information pertaining to the detection and divert zones can be relayed to a control system of the modular transfer unit 300 and/or a control system of other components of the conveyor system to which the modular transfer unit 300 is attached. This can allow the control system to control the operation of the modular transfer unit 300 based on the status of the articles on the modular transfer unit 300. The article sensors can provide an indication that the modular transfer unit 300 has received an article at the infeed side 302 of the modular transfer unit 300. The article sensors can provide an indication that the modular transfer unit 300 has discharged an article through the pass-

through detection zone 358. The article sensors can sense arrival of an article at the divert zones or at the chutes.

[0053] In some embodiments, the modular transfer unit 300 can include an on-board controller to which information pertaining to the detection and divert zones can be relayed. This can allow the modular transfer unit 300 to further operate as a stand-alone unit. In some implementations, the on-board controller can be connected to the conveyor system to which the modular transfer unit 300 is attached. This can allow the modular transfer unit 300 to receive instructions from the conveyor system about specific articles being conveyed. Such instructions may include whether to allow the article to pass through the modular transfer unit 300 or to be diverted from the primary flow path of the conveyor system.

[0054] The modular transfer unit 300 can include a frame 330. The frame 330 can comprise one or more structural support components of modular transfer unit 300. The frame 330 can be comprised of steel, aluminum, or other rigid materials. The frame 330 can be modular. The frame 330 can include one or more smaller (e.g., shorter) structural support components or standardized modules that are assembled together to form the full length of the frame 330. Accordingly, the length of the frame 330 can be customizable depending on usage requirements.

[0055] The frame 330 can provide structural support to the drivers 314, 314a to support the main belt 312. The drivers 314, 314a, and/or motor 315 can be coupled with one or more mounting locations on the frame 330. In one implementation, the drivers 314, 314a can be journaled within the frame 330. The article sensors can be mounted on the frame 330. The frame 330 can provide mounting locations to connect the modular transfer unit 300 with the chutes and/or other adjacent components of a conveyor system, such as at the infeed and/or pass-through sides 302, 304.

[0056] The frame 330 can include a track system. The track system can include first and second tracks 331, 332. The first and second tracks 331, 332 can be made of steel, aluminum, or other materials. The first and second tracks 331, 332 can extend along opposite sides of the main belt 312. The drivers 314, 314a, and/or motor 315 can be mounted on the tracks 331, 332.

[0057] The frame 330 can make the modular transfer unit 300 a standalone, self-contained system capable of operating separately from a conveyor system. In some

implementations, the frame 330 can be sized to fit between components of a conveyor system. This can beneficially allow the modular transfer unit 300 to be implemented on an as-needed basis in a conveyor system. In doing so, the modular transfer unit 300 can be swapped from one position in a conveyor system to another position in the conveyor system depending on the needs of the operator. In some implementations, the frame 330 can be sized to be retrofitted to existing conveyor systems.

[0058] The modular transfer unit 300, shown without the main belt 312 in Figure 5, can include one or more of diverter systems. The diverter systems can include diverter systems 322, 324, 326. The diverter systems 322, 324, 326 can correspond to the divert zones 352, 354, 356, respectively. The diverter systems 322, 324, 326 can operate like the diverter system 120a and include the same components. The diverter systems 322, 324, 326 can each include a divert belt, drivers, motors, and mounting brackets or similar structure. The divert belt can contact the lower portion of the movable components 116 of the main belt 312. The diverter systems 322, 324, 326 can be aligned generally perpendicularly with the primary flow direction of the main belt 312, or at any other angle. The angle of divert from the diverter station can be determined by a ratio of the main belt speed to the diverter belt speed. By operating the divert belt of a diverter system, the movable components 116 can be rotated, as described above with respect to Figure 2A. The operation of the divert belt can carry the article passing on the main belt 312 through one of the divert zones 352, 354, 356 towards one of the first or second divert sides 306, 308. The operation of the divert belt can carry the article off the main belt 312 and into the chute corresponding with the divert zone.

[0059] The modular transfer unit 300 can be configurable. The divert zones and/or the detection zones can be positioned along the frame 330 between the infeed and pass-through ends 302, 304. Accordingly, the positions of the diverter systems and/or chutes can be adjustable depending on use.

[0060] Figure 6 is a cross-section of the modular transfer unit 300 through a diverter system. The modular transfer unit 300 can include the frame 330. The frame 330 can include multiple structural components that are assembled together to provide a rigid platform for the tracks 331, 332. The frame 330 can include support rails. The support rails can include first and second support rails 390a, 390b. The first support rail 390a can be

aligned on opposite sides of the modular transfer unit 300. The support rails 390a, 390b can have a structurally rigid cross-sectional shape. In some implementations, the support rails 390a, 390b can have an I-beam or C-beam shape. The support rails 390a, 390b can be made of a rigid material such as steel, aluminum, or other suitable metals or non-metallic materials.

[0061] The support rails 390a, 390b can include one or more caps 392. The caps 392 can be attachable by one or more mechanical couplers or adhesives. The caps 392 can enclose interior portions of the support rails 390a, 390b. The interior portions can include access to the attachment locations for the tracks 331, 332, J-bolts 393, and/or rollers, or other catenary supports 614.

[0062] A strut or multiple struts 396 can connect the support rails 390a, 390b. Multiple struts 396 can be located between the in-feed end 302 and the pass-through end 304 of the unit 300. In one embodiment, the strut 396 can be attached to the first and second rails 390a, 390b by J-bolt assemblies. The J-bolt 394 can attach at one end within an aperture of the strut 396. An opposite end of the J-bolt 394 can attach with one of the support rails 390a, 390b. The opposite attachment end of the J-bolt 394 can include a threaded section that can be inserted through an aperture in the support rail. A nut or other mechanical attachment can be attached with the J-bolt such as at the threaded end. The strut 396 can provide support and rigidity to the other components of the modular transfer unit 300.

[0063] The main belt 312 can be looped over the drivers 314, 314a with an upper portion located on top of the modular transfer unit 300. A lower portion of the main belt 312 can be routed below or interior to the support rails 390a, 390b. In one implementation, the modular transfer unit 300 includes one or more rollers or catenary supports 614. The rollers or other support structures 614, such as but not limited to a flat support panel, ribs or other structure, can provide support to prevent sagging of the main belt 312 as it returns around the drivers 314, 314a. The rollers or catenary supports 614 can be attached between the support rails and provide support the lower portion of the main belt 312. A shaft of the roller 614 can be journaled within the support rails 390a, 390b.

[0064] The support rails 390a, 390b can include a track mount 391. The track mount 391 can provide an attachment location for attaching the tracks 331, 332 with the

support rails 390a, 390b. The track mount 391 can include one or more apertures for receiving bolts or other suitable mechanical couplers.

[0065] The track 331 can include a lower portion 335a and an upper portion 337a. The track 332 can have the same structural components as the track 331. The lower portion 335a can be attachable with one of the support rails 390a, 390b. The lower portion 335a can be attachable with the track mount 391 on an upper end of the support rail 390a. The lower portion 335a can include one or more channels or apertures. The channels or apertures can be sized to receive one or more bolts or screws or other mechanical couplers for attaching at the track mount 391.

[0066] The lower portion 335a can include one or more T-shaped channels. The T-shaped channels can be sized to receive a head of a support element, such as a bolt. The head can be slidable within the channel along the length of the track 331. A threaded end of the bolt can protrude from the T-shaped channel. The threaded end of the bolt can be received within one or more apertures of the upper track mount 391. Nuts can be attached over the threaded end of the bolt to attach the track 331 and the support rail 390a. The bolt can be loosened and/or removed and even with the head of the bolt remaining within the T-shaped channel and the side track 331 can be alternately moved or fixed relative to the support rail 390a thereby.

[0067] The upper portion 337a of the track 331 can include one or more apertures or channels. The apertures or channels can include one or more mounting locations for attaching components with the modular transfer system 300. The upper portion 337a can attach with one or more spurs, chutes, or takeaways of a conveyor system. The apertures or channels can include one or more T-shaped slots for receiving the head of one or more bolts. The upper portion 337a can attach with the motor 315, the chutes, or any of the article sensors. The sensor 362 is shown attached with the upper portion 337a of the rail 332 by one or more mechanical fasteners. The sensor 362 can include a light emitter 362a and a reflecting surface 362b opposed on the tracks 331, 332. The upper portion 337a can include one or more belt or chain guides 338.

[0068] An inner portion of the track 331 can include an attachment channel 334a. The attachment channel 334a can be oriented upwardly, inwardly, or at an angle to a horizontal. The attachment channel 334a can extend the length of the track 331 or less than

the length thereof. The attachment channel 334a can be T-shaped and configured to secure a head of a bolt. The attachment channel 334a can provide an attachment location for any or all of the diverter systems. Like the track 331, the track 332 can include a lower portion 335b, an upper portion 337b, and/or an attachment channel 334b.

[0069] The diverter system 322 can include one or more rollers 324a, 324b and a diverter belt 323. The diverter system 322 can include a motor assembly (not shown) for powering and providing torque to the drivers 324a, 324b for rotating and moving the diverter belt 323. The rollers and belt can be disposed underneath the main belt 312. An upper surface of the diverter belt 323 belt can be in contact with the main belt 312. The upper surface of the diverter belt can contact lower surfaces of the rotational members 116.

[0070] The diverter system 322 can include one or more brackets 326a, 326b. The brackets 326 can attach the drivers 324a, 324b and/or the motor with the tracks 331, 332. The bracket 326a can attach between the attachment channel 334a and the roller 324a. The head of a bolt can be inserted within channel 334a and attached with the bracket 326a at a threaded protruding end of the bolt. The diverter system 322 can alternately be slidable or fixed within the T-shaped channel 334a by loosening or tightening the bolt. The channels 334a can enable movement of the diverter system 322 longitudinally along the tracks 331, 332.

[0071] The above describes one possible implementation of a modular assembly for the diverter systems to be assembled and positionable within tracks of the modular transfer system 300. Other attachment arrangements between the tracks 331 and the diverter systems are within the skill of one of ordinary skill in the art of the present disclosure. The modular design can allow for additional diverter systems or other conveyance stations to be moved, added, or removed from the modular transfer unit 300. This results in limited investment of time to reconfigure the modular transfer unit and minimal downtime.

[0072] The modular transfer unit 300 can include one or more filler sheets, as shown in Figure 5. The filler sheets can include filler sheets 372, 374, 376, 378. The filler sheets 372, 374, 376, 378 can be placed in one or more gaps between the drivers 314, 314a, and/or between the diverter systems 322, 324, 326. The filler sheets 372, 374, 376, 378 can be metal or wood. The filler sheets 372, 374, 376, 378 can include an upper surface that is generally planer or otherwise shaped to engage the movable components 116. The filler sheets 372, 374, 376, 378 can extend across the width of the modular transfer unit (e.g.,

between the tracks 331, 332). The filler sheets 372, 374, 376, 378 can extend lengthwise (e.g., in the primary flow direction) to substantially fill the gaps. A gap can be considered substantially filled where no linear length greater than a length between rows of movable components 116 in the lengthwise direction is left unfilled. In some implementations, the entire interior length of the modular transfer unit 300 between the driver 314 and driver 314a can be substantially filled with filler sheets 372, 374, 376, 378 or diverter systems 322, 324, 326.

[0073] The filler sheets 372, 374, 376, 378 can contact the lower portions of the movable components 116. Contact between the filler sheets 372, 374, 376, 378 and the lower portions can cause the upper portions of the movable components 116 to spin in a direction of the primary flow path of the main belt 312. Articles can travel on the main belt 312 at a main belt speed. Articles also engaged with the movable components 116 can be propelled at conveyance speed in the primary flow direction at a speed greater than the speed of the main belt 312. In some implementations, the engagement of the filler sheets 372, 374, 376, 378 with the movable components doubles the conveyance speed relative to the main belt speed. Engagement of the diverter systems 322, 324, 326 with the lower portions of the movable components 116 can have the same effect on the conveyance speed as moving over the filler sheets. Accordingly, by filling the interior length of the modular transfer unit 300 between the driver 314 and driver 314a with filler sheets 372, 374, 376, 378 or diverter systems 322, 324, 326, the speed of the articles on the main belt can be increased (e.g., doubled) across the entire modular transfer unit 300.

[0074] The filler sheets 372, 374, 376, 378 can increase the processing rates of the modular transfer unit relative to conveyances without filler sheets 372, 374, 376, 378. The modular transfer unit 300 can achieve rates of between 50–75 articles per minute, although this number is not limiting. Moreover, the increased speed of the articles from the filler gaps can reduce gaps between the articles on the main belt 312 relative to conveyances without filler sheets 372, 374, 376, 378. Moreover, removal of the filler sheets 372, 374, 376, 378 provides the option of slowing the article processing rate.

[0075] In some embodiments, the filler sheets 372, 374, 376, 378 include a noise-reducing element, such as a noise-reducing coating. The noise-reducing element can be located between an upper portion of the filler sheet 372 and the main belt 312 (e.g., the

movable components 116). The coating can be a bonded friction coating, resin, polymer, fluoropolymer (e.g., polytetrafluoroethylene), graphite, molybdenum disulfide, rubber, latex, or another material.

[0076] With reference to Figure 7, the filler sheets 372, 374, 376, 378 can be mounted with the frame 330. The filler sheet 372 can be mounted across the tracks 331, 332. The filler sheet 372 can include one or more legs 373 having thereon mounts for attachment with the tracks 331, 332. The legs 373 can raise the level of the filler sheet 372 into contact with the main belt 312. The legs 373 can be movably mounted with the channels 334 of the tracks 331, 332. The attachment with the legs 373 can be by one or more bolts. Heads of the bolts can be alternately slidably mounted or tightened with respect to the channels 334. By engagement with the tracks 331, 332, the filler sheets 372, 374, 376, 378 can be reconfigurable to meet system requirements.

Control System of a Modular Transfer Unit

[0077] Figures 8 and 9 depict the modular transfer unit 300, as described above. The modular transfer unit 300 can further include a control system 800. The control system 800 can include a user interface 810, a programmable controller 820, the programmable controller 820 having a processor 830 and a computer readable medium 840, one or more encoders 850, one or more divert system control modules 812, 814, 816, the one or more article sensors (diverter sensors 862, 864, 866), and/or the one or more article sensors (chute sensors 363, 365, 367).

[0078] The user interface 810 can enable setup and configuration of the modular transfer unit 300. The interface 810 can allow a technical or mechanical installer to get the unit 300 setup and ready to be run in a short amount of time. The interface 810 can contain a full suite of setup configurations and/or documentation to assist user in setting up the unit 300. The interface 810 can include a user interface for displaying and one or more user input devices for inputting information for use by the controller 820. The user interface can be a screen. The user input device can be a mouse, keyboard, touchscreen or other user input system.

[0079] The interface 810 can facilitate automated and nearly automated setup. The interface 810 can be configured to prompt the user to input the desired parameters for the sorter. The prompt can include: the length of the modular transfer unit 300 (e.g., between the

rollers 314, 314a); the width of the modular transfer unit 300; the number of divert system; the number of belts per divert system; a distance (D1, D2, D3) to each of the divert system or to the sensors 362–366; a desired linear speed of the main belt; a location of any filler sheets or gaps; and/or the desired angle of divert into the chutes; or the desired speed of the divert system belts.

[0080] The controller 820 can include operation instructions stored on the medium 840 and executable by the processor 830. When executed, the operation instructions can cause the controller 820 to operate the modular transfer system 300.

[0081] The one or more encoders 850 can be used to measure a speed of the main belt 312. This information can be used in the operation of the unit 300 by the controller 820. The speed of the main belt 312 can be used to time operation of the diverter systems to divert an article off a side of the main belt 312. In some embodiments, the encoders 850 can be pulse generators. A pulse generator with a trigger wheel (e.g., similar to the flywheel of a car) can be used to measure the main belt 312 speed. This approach can supply adequate resolution for package tracking. Some embodiments of the unit 300 can use a “time of flight” speed tracking model, though the actual tracking may be based on pulses and not a timer in the controller 820. Since article tracking is not always zone-to-zone, knowing the speed of the main belt 312 can be helpful for the controller 820. The one or more encoders and/or pulse generators 850, run delay timers and/or speed reference settings can be used to determine the main belt 312 speed.

[0082] The one or more divert system control modules 812, 814, 816 can be used to control the diverter systems. The divert system control modules 812, 814, 816 can be the motor driver cards used to store the settings for the motors of the unit 300. This allows for the motors to remain close to the cards being utilized and to simplify power distribution to the cards. In most cases, the divert system control modules 812, 814, 816 will contain settings for the motors and/or the motion controlling logic to power the diverter systems.

[0083] The one or more article sensors (or diverter sensors or chute sensors) can be used to send a signal to the controller 820 to locate an article. The diverter sensors can indicate the presence or approach of an article to the diverter system. The controller 820 can then selectively operate the diverter system. The chute sensors can confirm that the article has been diverted.

[0084] The controller 820 can communication with a controller of a main conveyor system with which the unit 300 is interface. The controller 820 can communicate with a barcode scanner or OCR system on the unit 300 to identify articles thereon. The controller 820 can communicate with the divert system control modules. The controller 820 can communicate with the encoder 850. The controller 820 can track packages along the sorter (e.g., to time the diverter belts). The controller 820 can collect data for the unit 300 such as, but not limited to: the number of diverts of articles; the number of missed diverts; the number of misread, or other events. The controller 820 can interface with the interface 810, such as to receive data about the unit 300 for use in the operation instructions execution. In some variants, the controller 820 can initiate safety and stop interlocking, such as by way of a safety relay.

[0085] In some embodiments, the controller 820 can receive a signal from the one or more article sensors that an article on the main belt 312 is at a divert zone. The controller 820 can determine that the article is to be diverted to one side or other of the main belt 312. In response to this determination, the controller 820 can initiate the diverter system to divert the article towards the side of the main belt and into one of the chutes. The controller 820 can determine the run delay timing on the diverter system belts. In some embodiments, the one or more chute sensors are used to confirm packages that have made it off the main belt 312. In some embodiments, the unit 300 is not configured to stop or accumulate packages thereon. The one or more diverter sensors, and one or more chute sensors can tie back into the divert system control modules 812, 814, 816 and/or the controller 820.

[0086] Figure 9 depicts the unit 300 with the added complexity of not knowing there was a building column in the way of the chute 342. In this case, the chute 342 and the divert belt 322 have been backed up earlier on the unit 300 (moved to the right in the figure), thereby providing space for the building column. The control system 800 can adjust operation of the modular transfer unit accordingly. In one implementations, the user interface 810 can prompt a user to input the new location of the divert belt 322 relative to a datum. For example, the user can re-enter distance D1 as distance D1'. In another implementation, the track system can include one or more sensors that can detect and/or measure the position of the divert belt 322. The controller 820 can receive this data and adjust operation of the modular transfer unit accordingly. In some embodiments, the control system 800 can detect

that the position of the diverter zone has changed, such as with position sensors. In certain embodiments, the control system 800 can adjust operation of the divert belt 322 to adapt for the changed position of the diverter zone. For example, the timing and/or speed at which the divert belt 322 is operated can be modified in response to and/or to adapt for the change in position of the diverter zone.

Another Example of a Modular Transfer Unit

[0087] Figure 10 depicts a modular transfer unit 1000, similar to the previously described modular transfer units 100, 300. The unit 1000 can include dual-stage diverter belt technology 1020. At the chute stations 1042, 1043, a diverter system with two belts can be used.

[0088] The unit 1000 can include one or more diverter systems 1022. The diverter systems 1022 can be aligned to travel in the direction of the primary flow of the main belt (not shown) from the infeed side 1002 to a pass-through side 1004. The diverter systems 1022 can be attached with tracks 1031, 1033, similar to the above described tracks 331, 332. The track system can accommodate reconfiguration of the unit 1000. Depending on usage and the angle of the belt relative to the primary flow direction, the diverter systems 1022 can be used for high speed skew, in-line gapping, merge and diverge tables, and/or pick and pass modules.

[0089] Figure 10 depicts unit 1000 with three inline diverter systems. Certain embodiments have different numbers of inline diverter systems, such as one, two, four, five, six, or more. In some embodiments, the unit 1000 itself can be used to gap and separate products eliminating the need for a brake metering belt induction to the sorter.

Certain Other Embodiments

[0090] While certain embodiments have been described, these embodiments have been presented by way of example only and are not intended to limit the scope of the disclosure. Indeed, the novel methods and systems described herein may be embodied in a variety of other forms. Furthermore, various omissions, substitutions and changes in the systems and methods described herein may be made without departing from the spirit of the disclosure. The accompanying claims and their equivalents are intended to cover such forms or modifications as would fall within the scope of the disclosure. Accordingly, the scope of

the present disclosure is defined only by reference to the claims presented herein or as presented in the future.

[0091] Features, materials, characteristics, or groups described in conjunction with a particular aspect, embodiment, or example are to be understood to be applicable to any other aspect, embodiment or example described in this section or elsewhere in this specification unless incompatible therewith. All of the features disclosed in this specification (including any accompanying claims, abstract and drawings), and/or all of the steps of any method or process so disclosed, may be combined in any combination, except combinations where at least some of such features and/or steps are mutually exclusive. The protection is not restricted to the details of any foregoing embodiments. The protection extends to any novel one, or any novel combination, of the features disclosed in this specification (including any accompanying claims, abstract and drawings), or to any novel one, or any novel combination, of the steps of any method or process so disclosed.

[0092] Furthermore, certain features that are described in this disclosure in the context of separate implementations can also be implemented in combination in a single implementation. Conversely, various features that are described in the context of a single implementation can also be implemented in multiple implementations separately or in any suitable subcombination. Moreover, although features may be described above as acting in certain combinations, one or more features from a claimed combination can, in some cases, be excised from the combination, and the combination may be claimed as a subcombination or variation of a subcombination.

[0093] For purposes of this disclosure, certain aspects, advantages, and novel features are described herein. Not necessarily all such advantages may be achieved in accordance with any particular embodiment. Thus, for example, those skilled in the art will recognize that the disclosure may be embodied or carried out in a manner that achieves one advantage or a group of advantages as taught herein without necessarily achieving other advantages as may be taught or suggested herein.

Certain Terminology

[0094] Certain terminology may be used in the following description for the purpose of reference only, and thus is not intended to be limiting. For example, terms such as “upper”, “lower”, “upward”, “downward”, “above”, “below”, “top”, “bottom”, “left”, and

similar terms refer to directions in the drawings to which reference is made. Such terminology may include the words specifically mentioned above, derivatives thereof, and words of similar import. Similarly, the terms “first”, “second”, and other such numerical terms referring to structures neither imply a sequence or order unless clearly indicated by the context.

[0095] Conditional language, such as “can,” “could,” “might,” or “may,” unless specifically stated otherwise, or otherwise understood within the context as used, is generally intended to convey that certain embodiments include, while other embodiments do not include, certain features, elements, and/or steps. Thus, such conditional language is not generally intended to imply that features, elements, and/or steps are in any way required for one or more embodiments or that one or more embodiments necessarily include logic for deciding, with or without user input or prompting, whether these features, elements, and/or steps are included or are to be performed in any particular embodiment.

[0096] Conjunctive language such as the phrase “at least one of X, Y, and Z,” unless specifically stated otherwise, is otherwise understood with the context as used in general to convey that an item, term, etc. may be either X, Y, or Z. Thus, such conjunctive language is not generally intended to imply that certain embodiments require the presence of at least one of X, at least one of Y, and at least one of Z.

[0097] Terms relating to circular shapes as used herein, such as diameter or radius, should be understood not to require perfect circular structures, but rather should be applied to any suitable structure with a cross-sectional region that can be measured from side-to-side. Terms relating to shapes generally, such as “spherical” or “circular” or “cylindrical” or “semi-circular” or “semi-cylindrical” or any related or similar terms, are not required to conform strictly to the mathematical definitions of spheres, circles, cylinders or other structures, but can encompass structures that are reasonably close approximations.

[0098] The terms “approximately,” “about,” and “substantially” as used herein represent an amount close to the stated amount that still performs a desired function or achieves a desired result. For example, in some embodiments, as the context may permit, the terms “approximately”, “about”, and “substantially” may refer to an amount that is within less than or equal to 10% of the stated amount. The term “generally” as used herein represents a value, amount, or characteristic that predominantly includes or tends toward a

particular value, amount, or characteristic. As an example, in certain embodiments, as the context may permit, the term “generally parallel” can refer to something that departs from exactly parallel by less than or equal to 20 degrees. As another example, in certain embodiments, as the context may permit, the term “generally perpendicular” can refer to something that departs from exactly perpendicular by less than or equal to 20 degrees.

[0099] The terms “comprising,” “including,” “having,” and the like are synonymous and are used inclusively, in an open-ended fashion, and do not exclude additional elements, features, acts, operations, and so forth. Likewise, the terms “some,” “certain,” and the like are synonymous and are used in an open-ended fashion. Also, the term “or” is used in its inclusive sense (and not in its exclusive sense) so that when used, for example, to connect a list of elements, the term “or” means one, some, or all of the elements in the list.

[0100] Overall, the language of the claims is to be interpreted broadly based on the language employed in the claims. The language of the claims is not to be limited to the non-exclusive embodiments and examples that are illustrated and described in this disclosure, or that are discussed during the prosecution of the application.

Summary

[0101] Although the modular conveyor system has been disclosed in the context of certain embodiments and examples, it will be understood by those skilled in the art that this disclosure extends beyond the specifically disclosed embodiments to other alternative embodiments and/or uses of the embodiments and certain modifications and equivalents thereof. The scope of the present disclosure is not intended to be limited by the specific disclosures of preferred embodiments in this section or elsewhere in this specification, and may be defined by claims as presented in this section or elsewhere in this specification or as presented in the future. The language of the claims is to be interpreted broadly based on the language employed in the claims and not limited to the examples described in the present specification or during the prosecution of the application, which examples are to be construed as non-exclusive.

THE FOLLOWING IS CLAIMED:

1. A modular conveyor system comprising:
 - a frame having a first end and a second end;
 - a main belt supported by the frame, the main belt comprising a plurality of hingedly-connected belt modules, each of the plurality of belt modules comprising a body and a plurality of spherical balls, the spherical balls having an upper portion that protrudes above an upper surface of the body and a lower portion that protrudes below a lower surface of the body, the spherical balls configured to rotate relative to the body;
 - a main belt drive unit configured to drive the main belt in a first direction, the main belt drive unit comprising a motor and a drive roller, the drive roller engaged with the main belt at the first end of the frame; and
 - a diverter belt supported by the frame, the diverter belt configured to travel in a second direction that is generally perpendicular to the first direction, the diverter belt positioned at least partially underneath the main belt such that the diverter belt contacts the protruding lower portion of the spherical balls and the relative movement of the main and diverter belts causes the spherical balls to rotate;wherein the diverter belt is configured to be repositioned between the first end and a second end of the frame along a track system while remaining supported by the frame.
2. The modular conveyor system of Claim 1, wherein the track system comprises a first and second track, the diverter belt mounted with a channel on each of the first and second tracks by one or more brackets mounted within the channels, the channels extending in the first direction.
3. The modular conveyor system of Claim 2 wherein the channels are generally T-shaped, and the brackets are coupled within the first and second tracks by one or more bolts, each of the bolts having a head slidably engaged within one of the channels.
4. The modular conveyor system of Claim 1, wherein the frame comprises first and second support rails, the first and second support rails coupled together by one or more struts, the first and second tracks coupled with the first and second support rails, respectively.

5. The modular conveyor system of Claim 3, wherein the diverter belt is slidable relative to the first and second tracks by loosening the one or more bolts and fixed relative to the first and second tracks by tightening the one or more bolts.

6. The modular conveyor system of Claim 1, wherein the diverter belt comprises multiple diverter belts in a single module.

7. The modular conveyor system of Claim 1, further comprising a filler sheet coated with a sound dampening material, the filler sheet filling a gap adjacent to one of the diverter belt and the drive roller, the filler sheet engaged with the lower portion of the spherical ball.

8. A modular conveyor system comprising:

a frame having a first end and a second end;

a main belt comprising a plurality of hingedly-connected belt modules, each of the plurality of belt modules comprising a body and a plurality of spherical balls, the spherical balls having an upper portion that protrudes above an upper surface of the body and a lower portion that protrudes below a lower surface of the body, the spherical balls configured to rotate relative to the body;

a main belt drive unit configured to drive the main belt in a first direction at a main belt speed, the main belt drive unit comprising a motor and a drive roller, the drive roller engaged with the main belt at the first end of the frame; and

a filler sheet positioned at least partially underneath the main belt such that the filler sheet contacts the protruding lower portion of the spherical balls and the relative movement of the main belt and filler sheet causes the spherical balls to rotate;

wherein an article conveyed over the filler sheet by the main belt in the first direction is in contact with the upper portion of the spherical balls and is conveyed in the first direction at a conveyance speed, the conveyance speed being about twice the main belt speed.

9. The modular conveyor system of Claim 8, wherein the filler sheet comprises a sound dampening material engaged with the protruding lower portion of the spherical balls.

10. The modular conveyor system of Claim 8, wherein the filler sheet is repositionable between the first end and the second end of the frame along a track system.

11. The modular conveyor system of Claim, 10 wherein the track system comprises a first track and second track, the filler sheet mounted with a channel on each of the first and second tracks, the channels extending in the first direction.

12. The modular conveyor system of Claim 10, further comprising a diverter belt configured to travel in a second direction that is generally perpendicular to the first direction, the first diverter belt positioned at least partially underneath the main belt such that the diverter belt contacts the protruding lower portion of the spherical balls and the relative movement of the main and diverter belt causes the spherical balls to rotate, the diverter belt being repositionable between the first end and the second end of the frame along the track system.

13. The modular conveyor system of Claim 12, wherein the filler sheet is positioned adjacent to the diverter belt such that the conveyance speed is maintained across the diverter belt and the filler sheet.

14. The modular conveyor system of Claim 13, wherein the conveyance speed is maintained from the first end of the frame to the second end of the frame by one or more adjacent diverter belts and adjacent fillers sheets.

15. A modular conveyor system comprising:

a frame having a first end and a second end;

a main belt comprising a plurality of hingedly-connected belt modules, each of the plurality of belt modules comprising a body and a plurality of spherical balls, the spherical balls having an upper portion that protrudes above an upper surface of the body and a lower portion that protrudes below a lower surface of the body, the spherical balls configured to rotate relative to the body;

a main belt drive unit configured to drive the main belt in a first direction, the main belt drive unit comprising a motor and a drive roller, the drive roller engaged with the main belt at the first end of the frame;

a diverter belt configured to travel in a second direction that is generally perpendicular to the first direction, the diverter belt positioned at least partially underneath the main belt such that the diverter belt contacts the protruding lower portion of the spherical balls and the relative movement of the main and diverter belts causes the spherical balls to rotate;

a user interface and an input module;

wherein the diverter belt is repositionable along a track system extending between the first end and a second end of the main belt;

a control system comprising a processor and a computer-readable medium having operation instructions thereon, the operation instructions, when executed by the processor configured to:

receive a position of a diverter zone;

detect that an article on the main belt moving in the first direction is at the divert zone;

determine that the article is to be diverted towards a side of the main belt; and

operate the diverter belt to cause the article to change from moving primarily in the first direction to moving primarily in the second direction and towards the side of the main belt.

16. The modular transfer system of Claim 15, wherein the control system is further configured to determine whether an article is at the divert zone based on a signal received from a sensor.

17. The modular transfer system of Claim 15, wherein the control system is further configured to determine whether an article is at the divert zone based on a time delay after receiving the signal from the sensor, the sensor being positioned at a location before the divert zone in the primary direction of travel.

18. The modular transfer system of Claim 15, wherein the control system is further configured to prompt a user through the user interface to input the position of the diverter zone relative to a datum.

19. The modular transfer system of Claim 15, wherein the control system is further configured to automatically detect the position of the diverter zone based on a position of the divert belt along the track system.

20. The modular transfer system of Claim 15, wherein the control system is further configured to:

detect that the position of the diverter zone has changed; and

adjust operation of the diverter belt to adapt for the changed position.

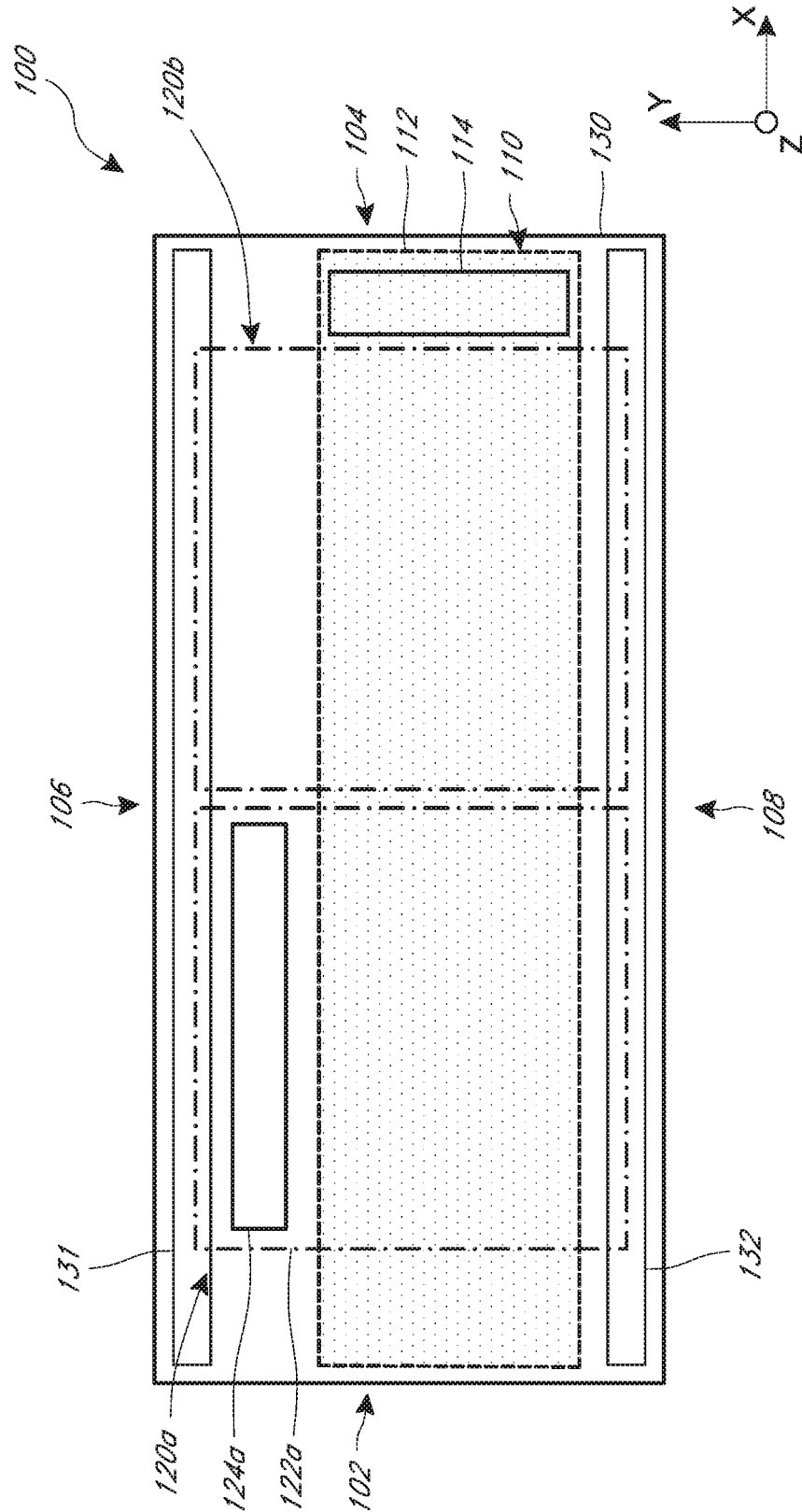


FIG. 1

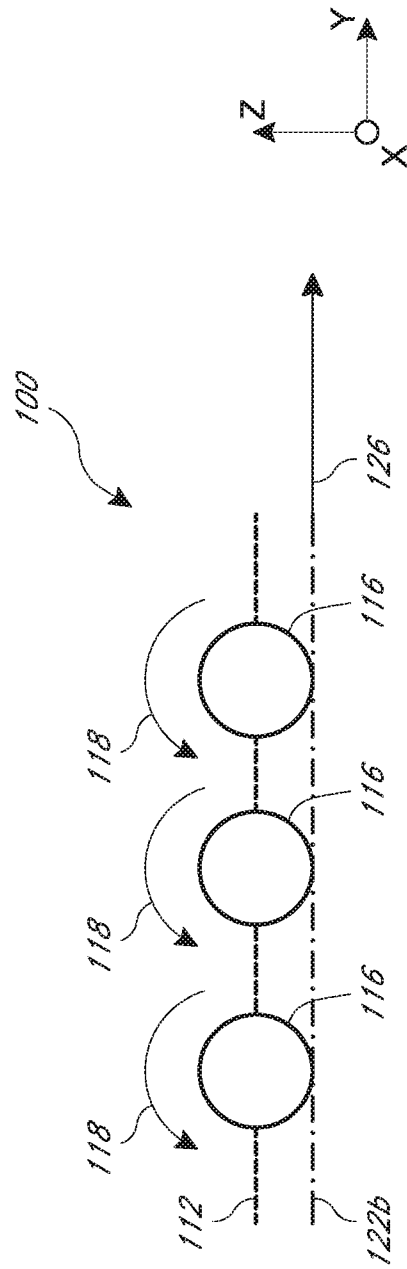


FIG. 2A

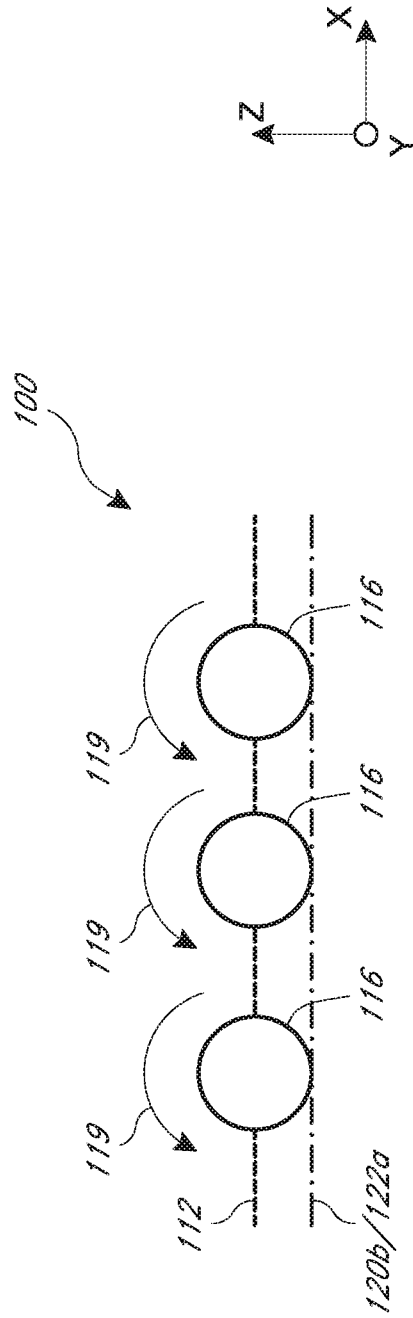


FIG. 2B

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FIG. 3

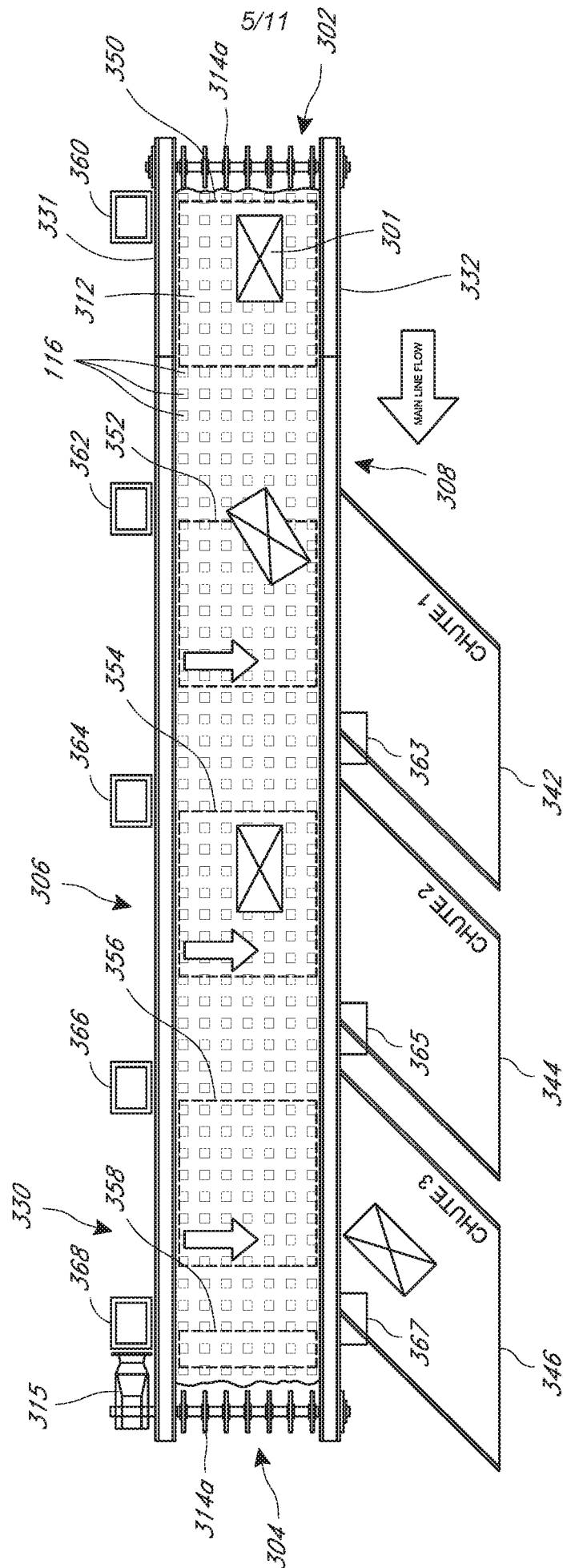


FIG. 4

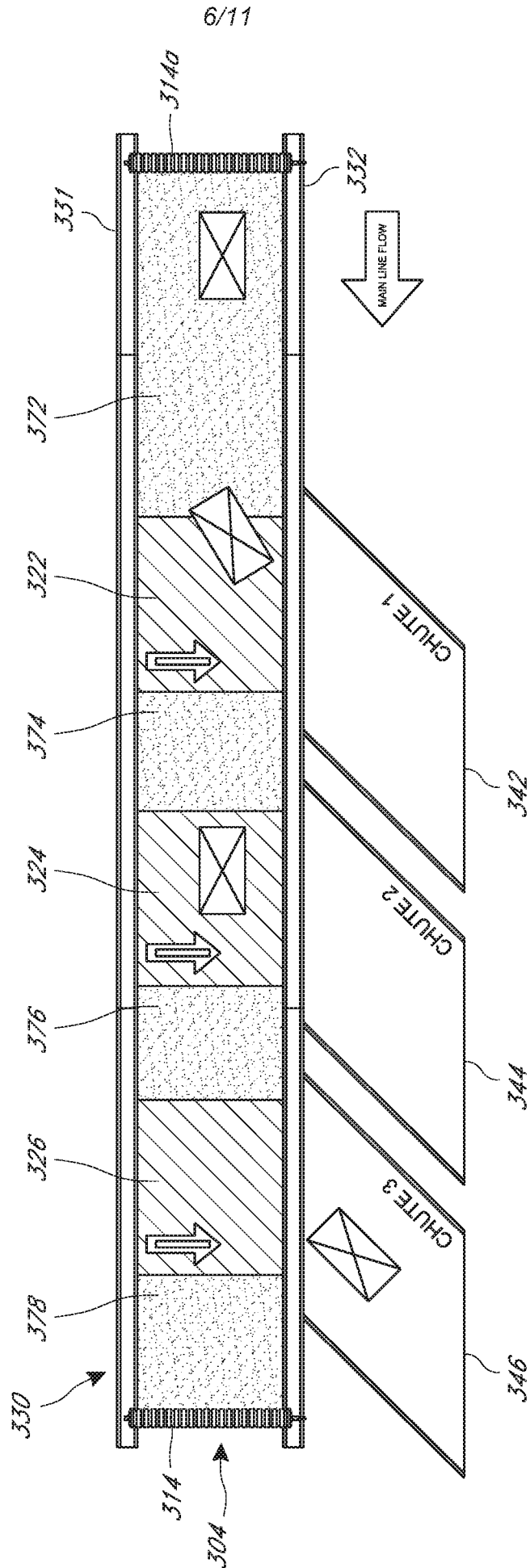


FIG. 5

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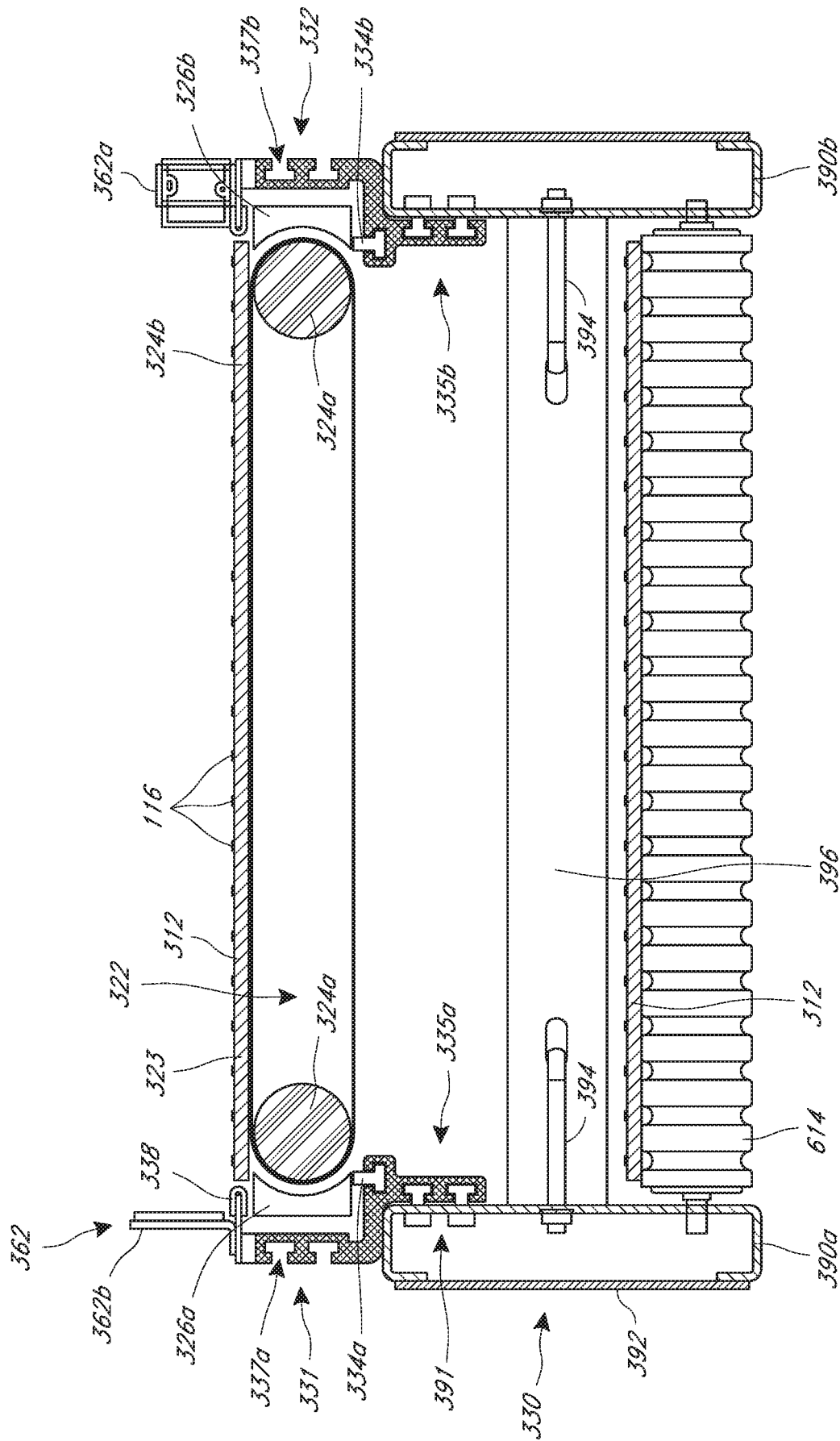


FIG. 6

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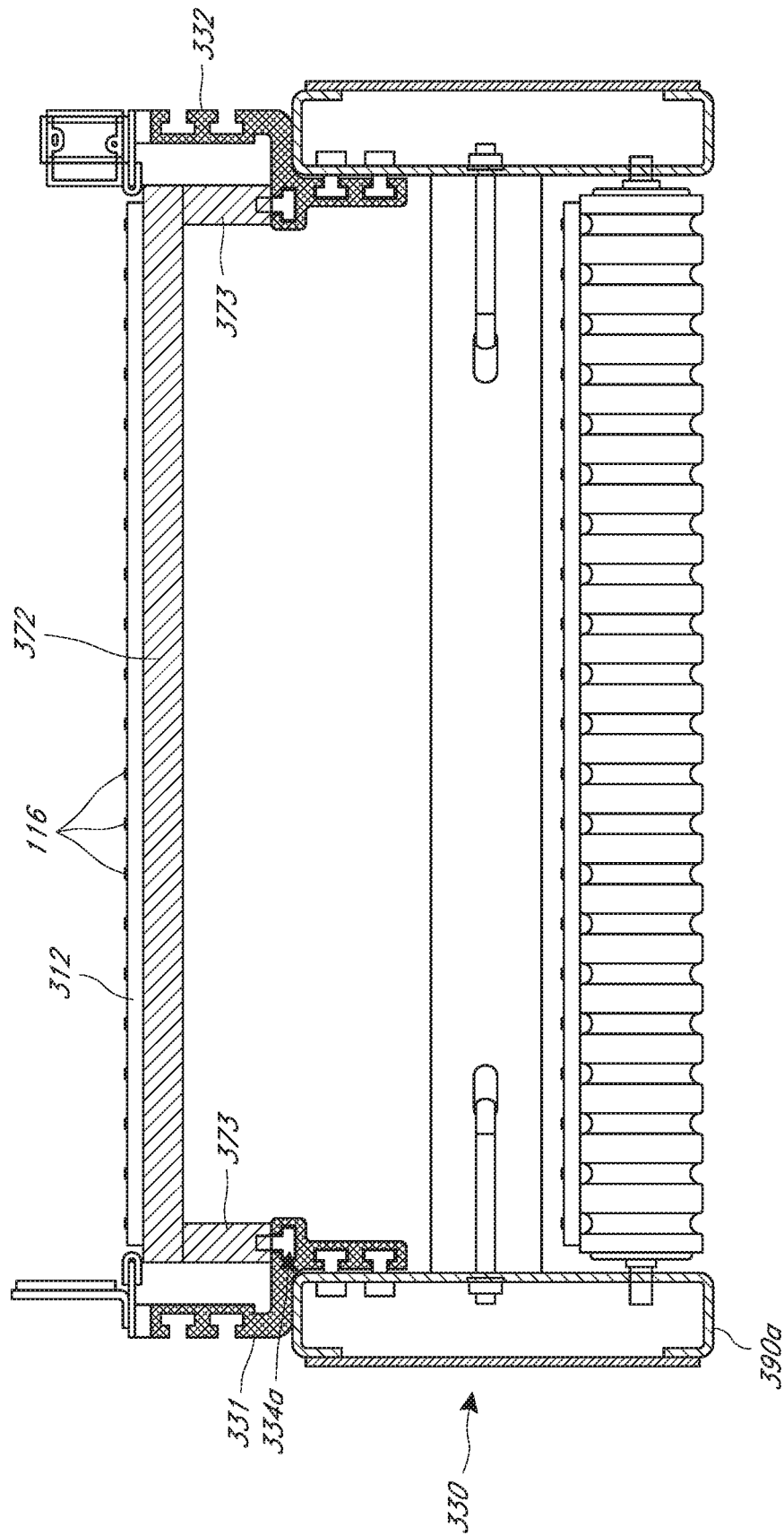
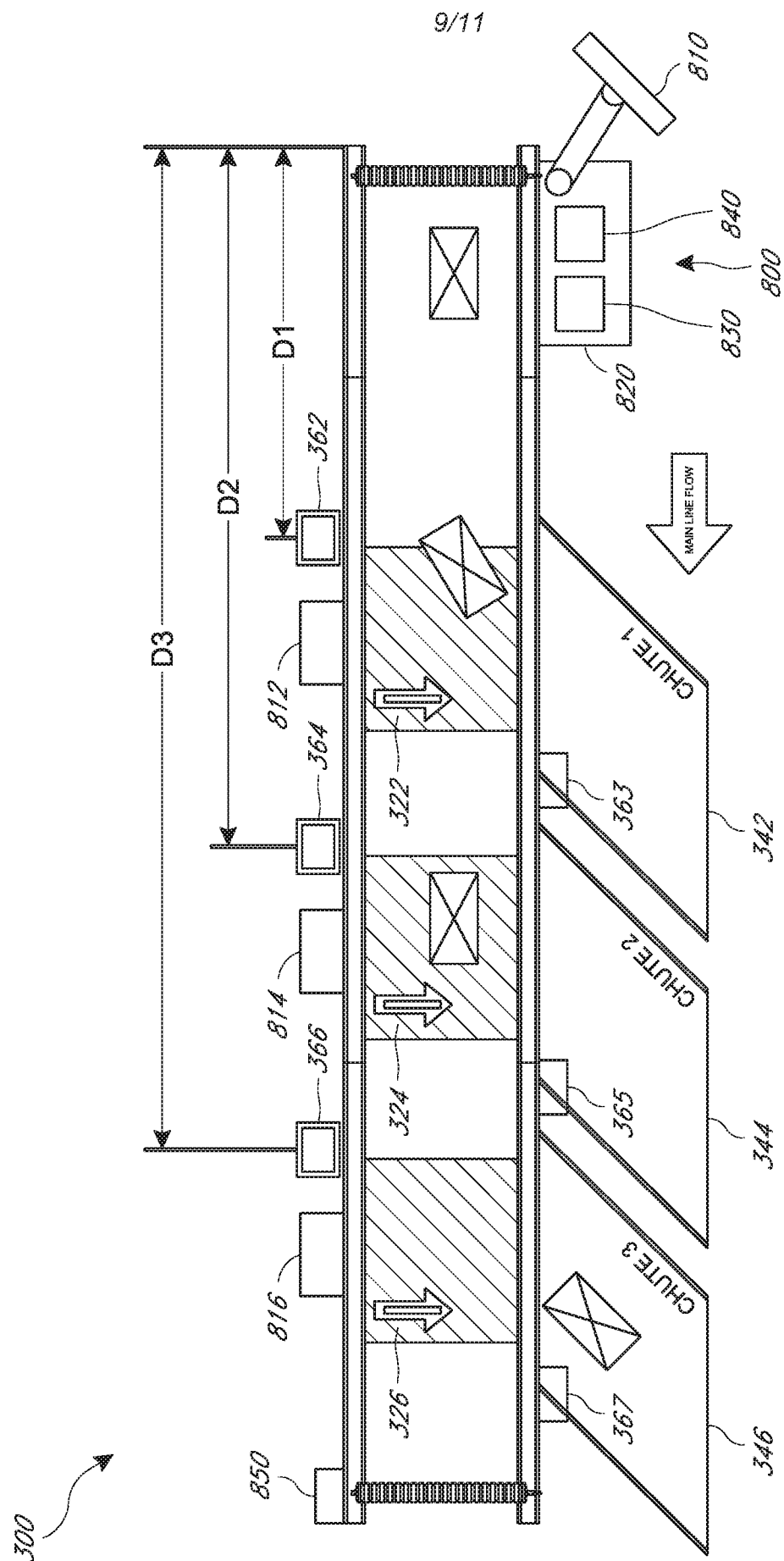
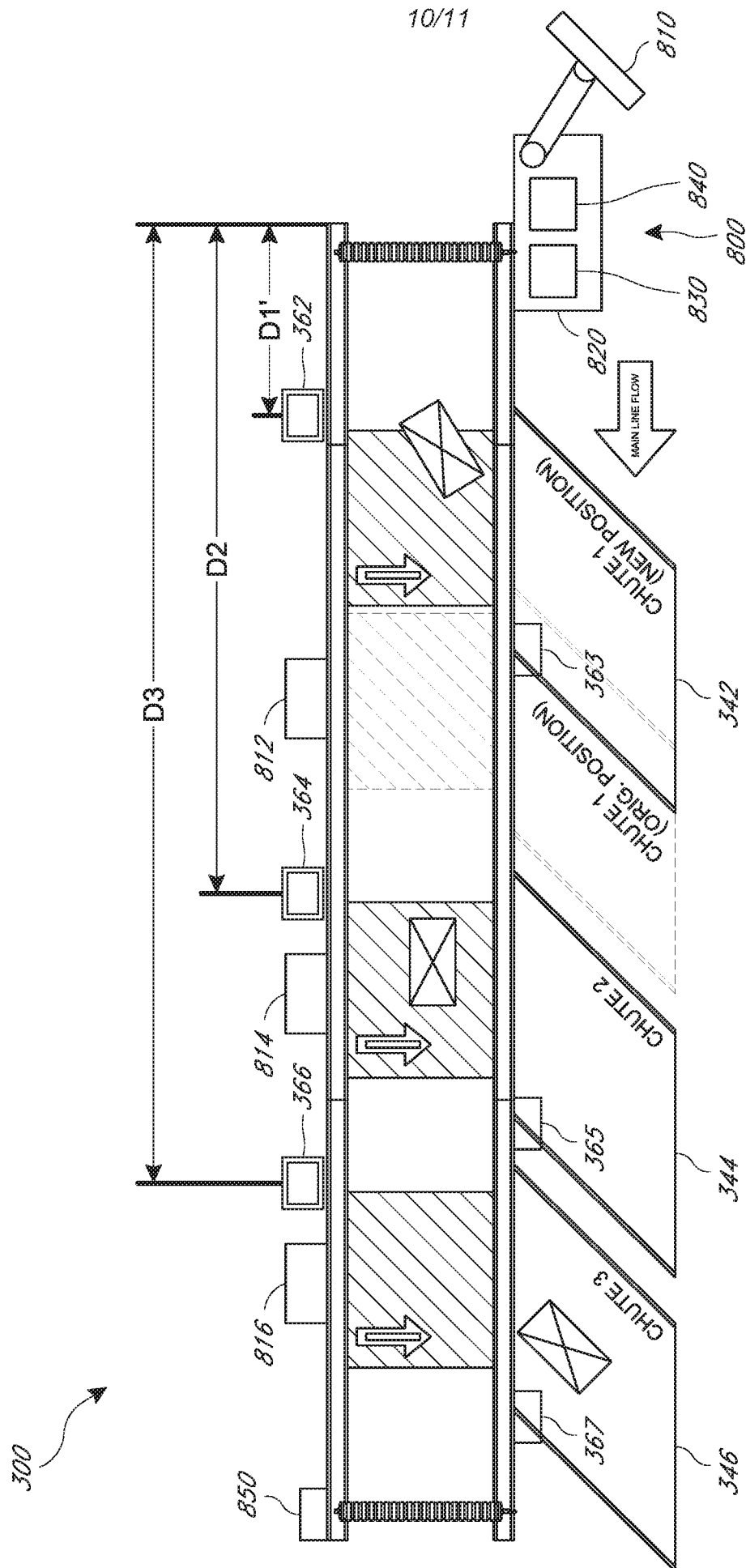


FIG. 7





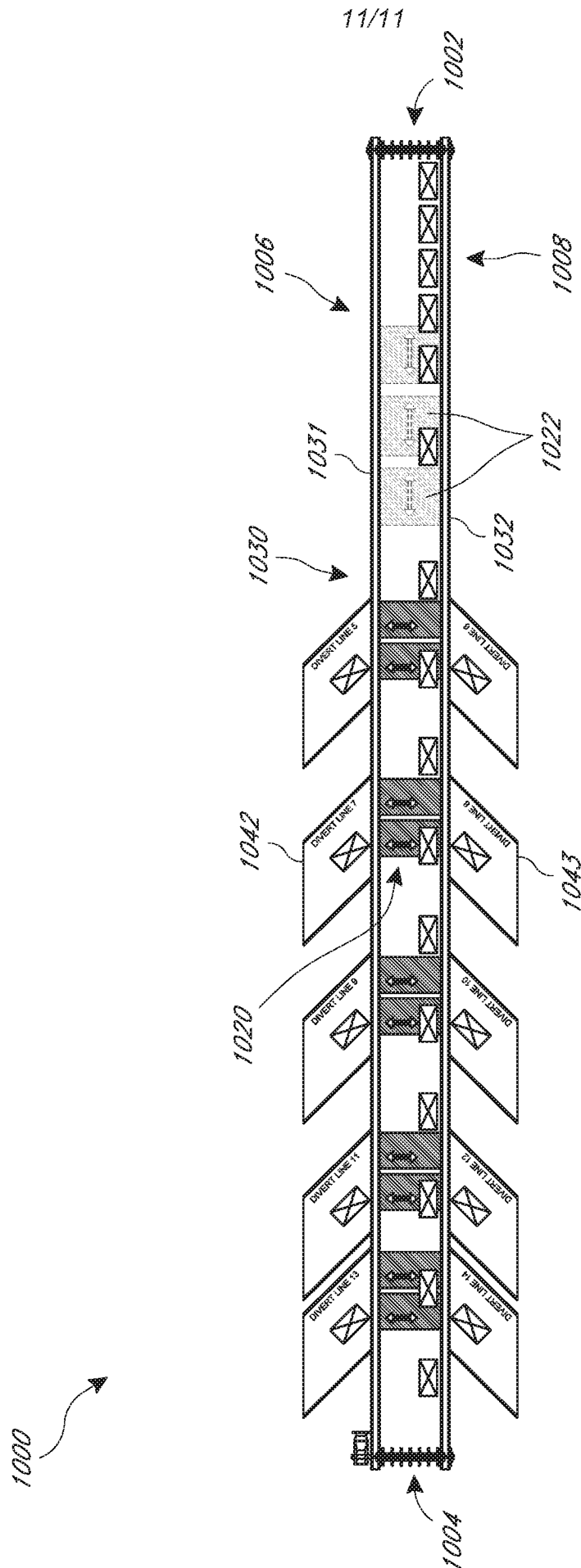


FIG. 10

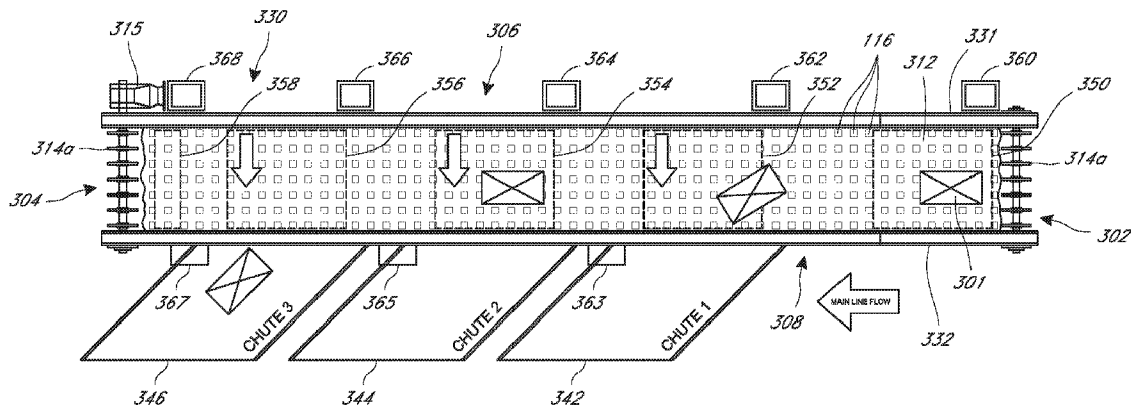


FIG. 4