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Perspective on the proposed SSA Marine Gateway Pacific Terminal at Cherry Point

By Bellingham Mayor Dan Pike - March 2011

Robust Community Dialogue is Critical

The proposed Gateway Pacific Terminal at Cherry Point is a complicated economic development opportunity that deserves a robust public dialogue, conducted in good faith, so we can determine together what is best for our community. We understand that there are firmly held opinions on all sides of this important issue. My administration continues to gather information, so we are in the best possible position to protect the community's interests. The City Council has not to date taken an official position on the project.

What is important to me as Mayor is to make sure that accurate facts about the project are on the table, to help us analyze the impacts on our community, ensure that impacts which cannot be avoided are mitigated, and finally, demand the costs of mitigation come from those who profit directly, not our local citizens. The answers to a few additional key questions also currently frame my perspective:

1. **Could our community benefit from as many as 1,700 well paid jobs necessary to develop and construct the project, plus a couple hundred operations jobs once built?** Absolutely. Though the facility would be outside the Bellingham city limits, the economic benefits would accrue throughout the local economy in the form of tax revenue to the County and retail and other sales resulting from the recycling of the workers' wages and benefits.
2. **Should we pursue these or other jobs at any cost, or regardless of the impacts an enterprise might have on the health, safety and quality of life in Bellingham?** No. Part of any cost-benefit analysis of economic development opportunities centers on whether the associated risks can be mitigated to allow the benefits to outweigh the downsides. (See "Concerns ..." below.)
3. **Does City government have the authority to unilaterally stop the project from moving forward?** No. Most of the regulatory clout for such a project will fall to the federal, state and county governments. And even the related policy issues, such as whether it is a U.S. security risk to export fossil fuel energy to global competitors, is a Congressional decision, not one for mayors and local councils.
4. **If the project is stopped from happening here, will it end there?** Probably not. Export needs are such that the project in some form will likely be moved elsewhere. If that elsewhere is the lower mainland of British Columbia (a current shipping site for bulk cargo), our community could endure the impacts of the goods traveling through our boundaries without accruing any of the benefits of the associated business transactions or work.

Comprehensive Research is Required

We are committed to researching these complex issues of community concern:

- Coal is traveling via train, barge and truck across parts of the U.S. every day. What have other communities experienced when in those transportation corridors and how have they mitigated their exposure?
- As a represented government on the Northwest Clean Air Agency Board, we know that our region endures some air pollution carried to us by the jet stream from other parts of the world, such as China or countries in the Pacific Rim. If the proposed coal exports are a lower sulfur form of coal than what China or others are currently using, might the air pollution impacts on us be less? Or will they have to use more of the low-sulfur coal to generate the thermal units desired and thus negate any pollution improvements?

- In transit, does coal produce less, the same or more dust the further it travels? How will western Washington's wet climate factor in?
- Will any dust or other by-products resulting from the bulk commodities being unloaded, managed via stockpiles or loaded onto ships be contained to the terminal site?
- What will be the definitive length of cargo trains and how will that impact access to community properties on either side of the tracks?
- Who will underwrite the cost of any mitigation factors?
- Does the current Burlington Northern-Santa Fe rail line that largely parallels the seashore have to be the primary corridor used to get product to the proposed terminal?
- What support industries or professional services typically spring up from an operation such as the proposed terminal?
- Are there independent, objective studies of the impacts on the environment or individuals habitually in the vicinity of the transit corridor?

An Alternate Route Should be Studied

While relief from community impacts of increased freight traffic needs to be studied during the project's EIS process, I know that there is an even more important alternative that must be included for full analysis: Burlington Northern's Burlington to Sumas route, instead of the coastal route running through Bellingham. Encouraging use of Burlington Northern's Sumas line as the primary route for Cherry Point SSA deliveries, as well as for the current deliveries to Robert's Bank, would actually reduce freight along the shoreline and through Bellingham, while benefiting passenger rail timetables and the ability to expand passenger service. It would also provide greater flexibility to meet future market conditions for both BNSF and SSA, and it would provide some route redundancy during natural disasters. This is a win-win solution that must be on the table. It is in the interests of all parties that the alternative freight route be studied as part of the project's EIS process.

Concerns about Environmental Justice, Noise and Traffic Impacts are Legitimate and Must be Addressed

In addition to asserting the requirements for robust community dialogue and appropriate research of various critical issues, I have already gone on record asking for a commitment by proponents to tackle these plausible impacts on our community:

1. The required Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) should have a scope that includes the entire transit corridor through our community and not just the proposed terminal's rural site;
2. Increased rail traffic must be mitigated by modern crossing equipment, with a federal Quiet Zone from Chuckanut Bay to the Cement Plant;
3. Access points to the waterfront must not be reduced or cut off for unreasonable amounts of time;
4. The banks below Eldridge neighborhood must be evaluated in light of the increased frequency and weight of trains and shored up, as needed, to prevent slides, particularly during the wet season;
5. If coal is to be transported, it should be in "gondola" cars, not "hoppers," to limit discharge, and the utilized cars should be covered.
6. All routes to the proposed terminal must be fairly evaluated, particularly if a route minimizes the corridor's contact with population and business centers and shorelines.

We have a long way to go and we have to be sure that whatever is done is "done right." I hope you will all stay involved over the next couple of years, as analysis of this proposal continues. Please contact the Governor's Office of Regulatory Assistance for information about the regulatory process for this project. For contact information, see www.ora.wa.gov