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GUEST OPINION

City, port disrupt Hayden Island process

My View • Annexation mess leaves public, fragile environment out in the cold

BY BOB SALLINGER AND DONNA MURPHY

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On June 20, the Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability held a public open house to roll out its plans to annex and rezone West Hayden Island to allow for development of Port of Portland marine terminals.

As we entered the building, we learned that there had been reports that people were coming to "disrupt" the meeting and that the city had put the police on standby. Rumor had it that the rascallions might tear down city posters, tear up city reports and commit various other acts of mayhem.

At first we thought staff were joking. The open house was attended primarily by 70 to 100 opponents of the development, but was dominated by residents of the Hayden Island Manufactured Home Community -- a group which by its own description is mostly elderly and low income, many of whom are in poor health, not exactly your typical flash mob.

However, city staff seemed quite serious -- and a bit nervous. What would potentially turn the otherwise peaceful residents of the Hayden Island Manufactured Home Community into paper-tearing, poster-ripping environmental terrorists?

Well, perhaps it was the fact that after 18 months of advisory committee meetings, the city went behind closed doors and negotiated comprehensive plan amendments, zoning code and an intergovernmental agreement with the Port of Portland in secret. Then it waited until the last minute and dropped a four-inch stack of legal and technical documents on the advisory committee and the community with only three working days to review before the open house, followed by a fast-track schedule to rush the agreement through the Planning and Sustainability Commission and City Council.

Perhaps it was the fact that the Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability abdicated its leadership role managing and evaluating Portland's annexation and zoning decisions and allowed the Port of Portland to write the terms of the intergovernmental agreements itself.

Then, in a truly bizarre act of subservience, the city released the port's terms under the city's logo while relegating its own concerns to margin notes.

Perhaps it was the fact that the intergovernmental agreement released by the city and written by the port is filled with sleazy legal terms that make even the nominal commitments ascribed to the Port of Portland legally unenforceable.

Perhaps it was the fact that the compromise that was the core of this process, one which would allow up to 300 acres for industrial development and protect at least 500 acres in perpetuity as open spaces, was quietly abandoned. The agreement allows the port to seek further rezoning of island open space to industrial use after 25 years.

Perhaps it is the fact that the city turned its back on its commitment to equity by failing to honor the community's request for a health impact assessment to determine whether diesel pollution from trucks



CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT / TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO
To resolve a longstanding dispute over development of west Hayden Island, Mayor Sam Adams proposed limiting the Port of Portland's future marine terminal to 300 acres and setting aside 500 acres for nature and recreation. But critics say the latest city proposal would allow the natural area to be rezoned for industry after 25 years.

that will pass their homes an average of every 2.8 minutes, idling ships and other industrial pollution sources will have a significant health impact on their community.

Perhaps it was the fact that the city's commitment to ensure that environmental impacts are minimized and fully mitigated evaporated under pressure from the Port of Portland. The agreement includes virtually no mitigation for the loss of hundreds of acres of forest, grasslands and wetlands, perpetuating the further degradation of our river.

Process a train wreck

State-of-the-art best management practices that the city and port had long assured the community would be clearly and explicitly defined in the intergovernmental agreement to limit impacts from things like nighttime lighting, noise, dust and pollution were replaced almost across the board by requirements that the port only meet minimum regulatory standards and conduct monitoring.

Or, perhaps it is the fact that this is the third time in 15 years that a West Hayden Island annexation process has resulted in a train wreck, because the port and the city have used the public advisory process to avoid rather than respond to legitimate concerns about the need for this facility and the impact it will have on our communities and our environment.

To date, the city and port have squandered millions of public dollars and thousands of stakeholder hours on these fake public processes, ignoring the facts and manipulating the process to arrive at a predetermined pro-development outcome. They haven't been successful because the concerns are real and the facts simply don't support development.

At the conclusion of the 1999-2000 annexation process, the Business Journal of Portland editorial board wrote, "We are not convinced that the plan to develop the island acreage shouldn't be permanently scrapped, but at least by putting it on the shelf for a while, it can be given further study from cost-benefit and environmental standpoints." (Portland Business Journal, Dec. 17, 2000).

At the conclusion of the 2009-10 annexation process, the Portland Tribune called out the city and port for what it described as a "curiously close relationship between a developer and the city bureau which must review its development proposal" and for "squelching" unfavorable findings.

The Tribune wrote that a "messy process clouds Hayden plans" and that a "review of records shows questionable activities behind the scenes" (March 3, 2011).

So did the predicted mayhem occur? The open house was packed and anger was indeed in the air. One group of about eight people sat around a table making and distributing signs with slogans like "stop the sham," "lies, lies, lies" and "no development on West Hayden Island."

For the next three hours, the community peppered the city with questions and concerns about the project and the process. They waved their signs and they expressed their outrage.

However, they did not damage the property or commit other acts of wanton destruction. In short, the community treated the city and port with far more respect than they treated us.

Bob Sallinger is conservation director of the Audubon Society of Portland. Donna Murphy is co-chairwoman of the Hayden Island Livability Project.