

Waterfront debate churns in Pittsburg

By Paul Burgarino
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Lots of waves are being made about the future of Pittsburg's waterfront.

For years, Pittsburg has sought to increase industrial activity, including expanded port operations. Most recently, the city and several companies on the waterfront talked with transportation and logistics firm Pasha Group about creating a marine terminal facility that could import and export about 100,000 automobiles each year.

Discussions with potential suitors have sparked a stern response from grass-roots advocacy group ACORN. At a series of gatherings, including one this month, the group has demanded officials be transparent about the process, and that it has a say in port decision-making.

City officials maintain there hasn't been a formal proposal or agreement to bring before residents.

The tenor of these meetings has been confrontational, including an accusation from Mayor Nancy Parent that ACORN is using "nasty tactics." Fliers circulated by ACORN representatives to certain neighborhoods depict pictures of worst-case scenarios and such messages as "Do you want your community to end up like this?" or "Could your neighborhood be torn down to make room for (the port)?"

In response to the fliers, City Manager Marc Grisham has insisted there are no plans to tear

down any existing single-family neighborhoods in the city.

Because of economic conditions and a lack of space, city officials say the idea of expanding port operations won't sail at this time.

"We analyzed the possibilities. At this time, it's just not feasible to do it," Grisham said, noting that a port operation would be too close to residents who live nearby and create traffic problems, among other issues.

Frank Gordon, a Pittsburg resident and former planning commissioner, is not convinced.

He thinks city officials were at one point moving forward with a serious plan, and would have perhaps rushed through a project without thorough environmental scrutiny. Even if it's a moot point, he said, the public should have been considered as stakeholders.

"It's not a port issue but rather the practice of having good government and being transparent," he said.

Most of Pittsburg's eastern waterfront is already occupied by industry with port activity. Pittsburg has four berths that handle about a dozen ships a month, said Brad Nail, the city's economic development director. Each berth is owned by a different company: Tesoro Corp., Koch Carbon LLC, USS-POSCO Industries and Dow Chemical Co.

A state bill signed into law in 2006 gave Pittsburg control of all tidelands from the marina to the Antioch border, meaning the city manages the waterfront for commercial activity.

The 38-acre site in question — including land owned by the city, Renova Partners, Tesoro and

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Marine Express Inc. — was made a unified development area. Currently, the city and refiner Tesoro are working to remove its remaining delayed petroleum coke inventory and figure out the best use for the company's 13-acre site.

Developer Renova Partners is also looking at options for its site, while Marine Express and the city are in settlement discussions over an eminent domain suit.

E-mails obtained through an ACORN-requested public records request show city officials were in talks with Pasha over a port deal.

According to the documents, Pittsburg was trying to clear about 46 acres for parking and detailing cars before shipment along the shoreline, as well as reactivating connecting rail lines, by working with Renova, Tesoro, POSCO and Garaventa Enterprises. A later phase could have included a 123-acre site owned by POSCO called Site LA.

A financial statement with projected revenue for Pasha's potential use of the Port of Pittsburg was created, along with a draft of a marketing agreement between Pasha and Pittsburg and a draft schematic map of different phases of a possible Pasha proposal.

That same month, Grisham, Parent, Nail and property executives visited San Diego to look at Pasha's port operations.

Nail insists Pittsburg was doing its due diligence in creating a thorough proposal. "It doesn't make sense to bring a half-baked proposal forward," he said.

What's frustrating, ACORN spokesman John Adams said, is that residents still have questions about port development, and Pittsburg failed to engage the public.

"It's clear to us that despite what the city had been publicly saying, they were continuing development. We can't help but feel we've been deceived," he said.

A deal with Pasha wasn't as "remotely close" as past Pittsburg efforts, such as trying to bring electric carmaker Tesla Motors to the city, Nail said. That deal also didn't reach the level of public comment.

In his job, Nail said he is "like a fisherman" for potential business, and is always "throwing out the line."

Nail and several other local economic development directors say they don't act in secret but need to be able to conduct private negotiations.

"Some end up being too small, some are too big, but it's still my job to seek those out," Nail said.

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