

THE GRISTLE

CATCH-22, POWER OF TEN: A decade ago, a city mayor—tired and unwell, distracted by looming new opportunities, not whole or wholly there—set in motion a process for the redevelopment of the city's central waterfront. Last week, a city council—tired and unwell, distracted by looming new opportunities, not whole or wholly there—approved the final plan for the redevelopment of the city's central waterfront. Between these bookends, the global economy cratered, the very manner and means by which large-scale brownfield remediations might be enabled and financed through private investment capsized, yet the plan approved was unchanged by that catastrophe by the slightest ripple.

On his way out the door in the middle of his term in 2006, a distracted Mayor Mark Asmundson scrawled his signature across a plan that ceded the city's ultimate braking authority under the state's environmental protection act (SEPA) to the Port of Bellingham. That authority was not clawed back by three successive mayors. The transfer of SEPA authority returned to curse Bellingham City Council—some on vacation, some on painkillers, some at the end of their term, and few in full attention of the facts they were tasked to approve, few—dare say we—at the top of their game.

"Governments, including the city, make many good decisions and occasionally great decisions, but rare bad decisions have significant unintended consequences that remain costly to the community," Jack Weiss cautioned last week as City Council prepared to approve, substantially unchallenged and unrevised, a \$200 million plan for the waterfront created by the Port of Bellingham but financed in large part by the City of Bellingham.

"The precedents before us are disturbing," Weiss observed. "Any developer anywhere in town is required to build arterials, to pay traffic impact fees and to not only pay park impact fees, but often with larger projects, contribute open space to the city as a recognition of the value of the upzone.

"The council is being asked to break this relationship we have with the development community and greatly favor just 200 acres out of the city's 18,500 acres. I feel it is perverse to favor what everybody has been saying for years, that is, the waterfront property will be the golden jewel of Bellingham—everyone will want to work, shop and live there. If that is the case, why are we further subsidizing with city taxpayer dollars the most premium land in town? Would not any developer simply say that this land is worth much more than anywhere else in town for its profit potential and therefore be willing to act like any other developer and pay the conventional costs of development?"

Weiss characterized the city's negotiations with the port as starting from an initial position of "aburdity" to finish at "unfair," deeply unfair.

In documents submitted to council, Weiss (who gave the impression almost unique among council members of having actually *studied* the documents) noted the city is required by the port to commit to at least \$48 million in road construction typically paid by developers and at least \$30 million in park development (plus at least \$8 million in park and habitat land purchase) that typically are paid for by developers of large projects, a massive transfer



views

OPINIONS » THE GRISTLE

BY STEPHAN MICHAELS

Waterfront Plan

PLANNING PROCESS RAISES MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

Like many Whatcom County residents, I cannot profess being sufficiently educated about the specifics of Bellingham's complicated waterfront plan to dissect it in detail. Yet one thing is patently clear: the public process conducted over the preceding ten years has been tossed aside in order to fast track the development of our long-neglected shoreline. In the desire to get "something done" sooner than later, the current plan provides potential developers with sweet incentives and locked-in environmental standards. And in the long term, taxpayers will not be getting what they wanted: a vibrant, multi-use waterfront, properly cleaned up from the toxic mess left by the Georgia-Pacific paper mill.

Bellingham City Council member Jack Weiss has been the leading voice of reason on this issue, identifying several shortcomings in the current plan, and the need for more review. Yet those misgivings received little more than lip service by a passive and dismissive council. That raises a red flag: far more public scrutiny and input is in order before any vote is cast.

One would think the City Council and our mayor could provide a better public forum to educate the community on what this revised plan entails, before it is enacted. Yet the city's planning department asserts that further review is unnecessary, and the city acquiesces. How is this in the public interest?

Bellingham has the potential to become a remarkable destination



place, the jewel city of Washington state. A well-planned, environmentally sensitive waterfront can help accomplish that. Sadly, this new plan will ultimately result in a lot of urban density, marine based industries, some condos and another marina—all being built atop a toxic shoreline, most likely capped rather than adequately remediated.

Where is the detailed plan for cleanup and remediation before any development is ever undertaken? Where's the environmental assessment to address habitat impacts and mitigations to development? We should be striving to create habitat corridors, to protect marine and land mammals, to protect estuaries and beaches, and not blithely pursue urban density on the shoreline.

Where is the long-range vision to foster the vital connection between community and government that might bring ecological health and living-wage vocations to the waterfront? While some marine-based industries certainly provide good paying jobs, what about also developing more innovative and creative enterprises that integrate the community as an active partner?

We live at the center of one of the most productive ecosystems in the world, the Salish Sea and its vast watershed. Once our beleaguered bay is remediated of its mercury deposits, dioxins and chlorides, perhaps we could tap this resource and build a kind of marine science research center on the waterfront. It could be a joint venture between the city and the university and might even include government agencies like the Department of Ecology.

We could develop a kind of Salish Sea resource hub where educators, scientists and students would work in consort, furthering exploration and education into conservation and restoration of the ecosystem and its species. That may sound like pie-in-the sky, but it's an example of the very kind of development that could create good paying jobs for professionals and also Western graduates, affording Bellingham's waterfront a brand of vitality that real estate development and industry simply can't.

Dear elected officials, please don't forsake the big picture by saying that "we just can't afford" a better alternative to the proposal presently before us. If the city can allocate resources to build a road for Costco, and to create a quiet zone along the railroad tracks at Boulevard Park, then surely we can endeavor to attract the investments and funding to develop the kind of vibrant, ecologically sound waterfront that the public deserves. ☺

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▲ VIEWS EXPRESSED ARE NOT NECESSARILY THOSE OF CASCADIA WEEKLY

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of wealth from city taxpayers to—ultimately—luxury yacht owners. The port, he noted, will profit from these city-paid amenities by increasing the appraised value of raw land to sell or letting the port give these city-donated amenities away at a discounted price to developers.

In recently disclosed analysis, the city estimated the value of wealth transfer to private developers that occurs through an upzone of waterfront property approved by council at at least \$78 million—a giveaway to developers, financed by the public.

"In my opinion," Weiss said, "the reason we are in this predicament is that a previous council seemed to have been caught up in the stars and glimmer of what the waterfront could be in the days of unsustainable growth eight or nine years ago and just wanted to say 'yes' to everything. The unintended consequences of breaking long-set development policy and the financial impacts associated with that either never considered or swept under the rug."

Earlier in a week dominated by special sessions as council struggled to complete their approval of the waterfront master plan, council was told they could not even include the *wish* that the plan might consider the social impacts of this massive transfer of public property into private ownership. Council was told no, since the original impact statement, prepared by the port absent the city's SEPA brake, did not consider social impacts, the plan could not now include even a wistful regret of that in final documents.

"If the city cares about the social aspects of the waterfront, we can do nothing about that," an aggrieved Council member Michael Lilliquist summarized. "Because the study doesn't say this is something we should care about, the city is not in a position to say this is something we care about."

"I am frustrated at this point," Weiss exclaimed. "How we can go about addressing the unintended consequences of situations created a year ago, two years ago, three years ago, and have it cascade in future unintended consequences to the point where [our staff] says, 'No, you can't do this because it was already decided long ago.'"

And yet, without a single stick being assembled on the waterfront, council votes as if the future is set forever in stone. This is the way the plan ends, not with a bang but a whimper. ☺



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