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Who runs the port?

Commission makes point in battle over staff aides

by Sandra McDonough
Times business reporter

What a difference a cup of courage makes. That's how Bill Erxleben, a member of Port Watch, views what happened at last week's unusual Port of Seattle Commission meeting. It was historic, he said. Astounding. Three out of four commissioners — Ivar Haglund, the fifth, was absent again — stood up to their staff and publicly disagreed on a sensitive issue.

Nobody could remember it happening quite that way before.

It was, said Erxleben, like a scene the Cowardly Lion might have played in the Wizard of Oz. The commissioners have long wanted Oaz, and finally, they got a cupful.

"Then they roared and found, jeez, this kind of works," said Erxleben, a Bellevue lawyer and a former Federal Trade Commission official. Port Watch is a citizens group that monitors port actions.

Something different did happen at Tuesday's commission meeting, although it's hard to say whether Erxleben's interpretation of the events is the most accurate one. In an unusually heated

debated, commissioners clashed horns with Dick Ford, their executive director since 1977.

The debate started out as a question about whether the five commissioners should be able to hire individual staff aides. But it wasn't really that simple. Although they never said it, what the commissioners and Ford were really squabbling over is who runs the port — the staff or the commission.

Until now, it's been fairly clear that the staff, led by Ford, runs things at Pier 66. The commission acts like a corporate board of directors. It sets policies — usually proposed by Ford — and passes resolutions — usually proposed by Ford. That's how boards of directors normally work with their company's chief executive officer.

But the Tuesday debate changed things because Ford lost. The score was 3-1, with only commission President Henry Simonson taking his executive director's side. As a port staff member, Ford didn't get to vote.

The fight, said Pat Davis of the Seattle League of Women Voters, was an important turning point in the port's history. She said commissioners finally decided they needed to play a stronger role in the happenings at Pier 66.

"It really is symbolic for the future of the port," she said, adding that she hopes the port is on its way toward having "a strong commission, a strong executive director and a strong staff."

A League of Women Voters recommendation sparked the debate at the commission meeting. Among its proposals for "streamlining" the port's public processes, the league recommended that each commissioner be allowed to hire a staff assistant to help him gather information from the port staff about issues and keep in touch with issues in the community.

Commissioner Jim Wright, who joined the port this year, had advocated staff aides before. Port brass, however, may have thought they had squelched the idea when they found a job in the planning department for Vicki Schmitz, the former Wright campaign aide who apparently was in line for his aide job.

But the issue wouldn't go away. When the commission began considering the league's proposals Tuesday, Wright and others said they wanted to talk about the aide proposal and other issues Ford omitted from his recommendations for action. It became clear that Commissioners Jack Block and Paul Friedlander agreed with Wright that the commissioners should have access to some assistance outside the regular port staff.

The problem, commissioners said, is that their port posts are part time. Full-time or part-time aides could do legwork for the commissioners and help them prepare for policy decisions.

"The staff works for Dick. The staff doesn't work for the commissioners," said Wright. "You're always in a fog bank when you're a commissioner. You really don't have a full feeling for the issue because you're not briefed on it."

"The port commission really has no control over the port. What we are at best is a group of guys who, when a mistake is made, they blame us," he added. "Well, I don't want to be the fall guy."

Ford never said the commissioners should be denied information. But, he said, creating posts of

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commissioner aides would create an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy between the commissioners and the port staff. If commissioners want answers, he said, they can call the members of his staff — or Ford himself — for the information they need.

In essence, what he was saying was that the commissioners have staff — the 1,000 people who work for the Port of Seattle.

The commission, Ford said, should act as a board of directors. And that means setting policy, then allowing the staff to carry the policy out and manage port operations. Ford apparently saw the commissioners' advocacy for aides as an encroachment on his own management style and a movement toward a fundamental change in the way the port operates.

Simonson agreed. What Wright and the others want, he said, is a two-tiered operation at the port. There would be a legislative body — the commission — and an executive branch — Ford's staff. And they would be adversaries.

That's not how it's supposed to work, Simonson said.

"The staff runs the harbor and the staff runs the airport. We commissioners act as a board of directors. If we don't like what's being done, we should fire the staff, not this," the commission president said.

Simonson, Ford and others fear the aides would become political legmen for ambitious commissioners. When this argument comes up, the people advocating it are usually talking about Wright, who makes no bones about his interest in running for a more attractive political post in the future. Lately, he's been named as a possible candidate for King County executive.

Like Ford, Simonson said creating commissioner aides would return the port to the bad old days — the days of political patronage which the Port of Seattle tried to eradicate two decades ago.

Merle Adum, a 20-year member of the port commission who was beat by Wright in the 1983 election, sees it that way.

Things were pretty bad at the port in the 1950s, he said. "The place was riddled with nepotism. Everything depended on who you knew. The commissioners hired relatives, friends, anybody who would get them a vote," Adum said.

To reform the system, state law was changed. Commissioner salaries, set at about \$3,000 per year, were discarded and replaced with the nominal sum of \$1 per year. (Actually, since 1974, commissioners at all Washington ports

have earned \$40 for each day they conduct port business, with a maximum of \$2,880 per year.)

The Port of Seattle Commission was expanded from three to five members and it established itself as a board of directors that relied on a strong executive director who managed the port, Adum said.

"If he didn't do things the way we wanted them, we'd get rid of him," Adum said.

The early 1960s also launched the port on a period of phenomenal growth. Eventually, the Port of Seattle became one of the biggest ports in the world and a major competitor for Far East trade.

For a long time, the port worked in relative peace under the system Adum described. Then last year, the commission suddenly found itself in the limelight again, as the public started questioning some of its actions, including the ill-fated decision to name Seattle-Tacoma International Airport after the late Sen. Henry M. Jackson.

The harsh public scrutiny cost Adum and Henry Kotkins their jobs as port commissioners. It paved the way for the election of Wright and Haglund, and a renewed public interest in the port.

Groups like the League of Women Voters and Port Watch became more adamant in their insistence that the commission would have to become more open to public involvement at its meetings. And, while it acts like a business in many ways, they said the port must remember that it is a government agency run by five elected officials who are answerable to King County voters ever six years.

Eventually, the port probably will resolve the aide question with some sort of compromise. But the debate raised questions about the structure of the port's administration — questions that may stay around.

For instance, how much is the port a business and how much a government? Are the commissioners really the port's managers? And if they are, shouldn't their jobs be made full time with salaries that reflect their duties?

Ford, after all, makes \$81,000 per year, supposedly to run things at Pier 66. And if the commission is just a board of directors, why is it even an elected body? Maybe an appointed board could function better in that role.

Ford doesn't plan to stick around to see all of the issues resolved. He's been openly talking about retirement even though he is only 54. No date has been set, but it's generally believed he'll leave the port in about a year.

But many of the questions will remain for Ford's successor, especially if the commission continues to ask the kinds of questions it asked Tuesday.

Agendas

Chorage Health Systems

Ordinance/Regulations Item

Chorage Health Systems



Public Meetings

ANCHORAGE PORT COMMISSION OCTOBER 1, 1984 REGULAR

LOCATION: Terminal No. 3
Conference Room
Port of Anchorage
7:30 p.m.

TIME: I. CALL TO ORDER
II. MINUTES

- September 17, 1984 - Regular
- III. OLD BUSINESS
 - Knik Arm Crossing - Position for Presentation at Public Hearing October 3
 - IV. NEW BUSINESS
 - Terminal Use Permit - Seaway Express
 - V. PORT DIRECTOR'S REPORT
 - VI. PERSONS/ITEMS NOT ON AGENDA
 - VII. ITEMS FOR NEXT MEETING AGENDA
 - VIII. ADJOURNMENT

P.O. #1892
Pub.: 9/23/84

General Notices

PLANNING

been accepted by the Authority for consideration. 15.125 Abbreviated Planning Officer, acting as the on on the below listed anyone who believes he e an application to be present that information n 5:00 p.m. October 5, 1 be delivered to the Avenue, 5th Floor, or

BELL WOODS SUBDI-
TION ONLY
TEIN PROPERTIES
(to) the south 42' of the ine easment

er of Diamond Blvd. and

ds Subd., located in the

NE1/4 of Section 15, T12N, R4W, S.M., Alaska

SAND LAKE COMMUNITY COUNCIL
CASE: S-7860 JUNIPER VALLEY SUBD., TRACTS A-1 & A-2

PETITIONER: WILLIAM & MILDRED LLOYD

REQUEST: Resubdivide 1 tract and an unsubdivided parcel of land into 2 tracts

TOTAL AREA: 123.083 acres

LOCATION: Northeast of Teri Drive and east of Arlene Drive

CURRENT LEGAL: Juniper Valley Subd., located in the E1/2 SW1/4 & W1/2 SE1/4 of Section 33, T14N, R1E and an unsubdivided parcel of land located in the E1/2 W1/2 SE1/4, Section 33, T14N, R1E, S.M., Alaska

EAGLE RIVER VALLEY COMMUNITY COUNCIL
CASE: S-7861 SPRING HILLS ESTATES, ADD #1, Bk. 1, LOTS 11A & 12A

PETITIONER: DESIGNS IN WOOD LTD.

REQUEST: Resubdivide 14 lots into 2 lots

TOTAL AREA: 2.95 acres

LOCATION: South of Silver Spring Circle and west of Our Rd.

CURRENT LEGAL: Spring Hills Estates Add #1, Bk. 1, LOTS 1-14, located in the NE1/4 of Section 15, T12N, R3W, S.M., Alaska

MID-HILLSIDE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

CASE: S-6633B MOUNTAIN VALLEY ESTATES ADD #1, Bk. 4, LOT 8A, Bk. 5, LOTS 10A, 11A & 11B

PETITIONER: CONSTRUCTING ENGINEERS

REQUEST: Resubdivide 3 lots into 4 lots

TOTAL AREA: 6,716 acres

LOCATION: East of Johnny Dr. and on either side of Michael Dr.

CURRENT LEGAL: Mountain Valley Estates Add #1, Bk. 4, Lots 8 & 9, & Bk. 5, Lots 10 & 11, located in the SW1/4 of Section 33, T14N, R1W, S.M., Alaska

SOUTH FORK COMMUNITY COUNCIL

P.O. #1894
Pub.: 9/23/84

BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS

ANCHORAGE WOMEN'S COMMISSION

Appointments to be made to 9 seats, staggered terms

Applications available in information racks at Hill Bldg. and 3500 E. Tudor Road

Apply no later than Wednesday, September 26

P.O. #1892
Pub.: 9/23/84

The Anchorage Times Friday, September 14, 1984

Shippers oppose Downtown plan for Knik crossing

Associated Press

The two largest shippers serving the state say they may not be able to make year-round cargo deliveries to Anchorage if a bridge across Knik Arm is built downtown.

Representatives of Sea-Land and Totem Ocean Trailer Express (Tote) say a bridge near the Port of Anchorage would pose a severe navigational hazard during the winter months when strong tides are complicated by heavy ice buildup.

Their concerns were seconded by Coast Guard Capt. Glenn Haines, Captain of the Port of Anchorage, and one of the pilots who guides Sea-Land vessels to their berths.

"Our opinion is that it is an extremely dangerous situation," said George Whittaker, Sea-Land's regional manager for vessel operations. "It may mean limiting the calling of vessels here on a year-round basis."

"From what the masters are telling me, I can assure you there will be times when they will not take their ships through that bridge," said Richard Griffith, Tote's vice president of marine operations.

"It's like putting a control tower at the end of the runway," Griffith said. "You just don't do it."

Haines said a Downtown bridge would pose "a formidable burden on the mariner entering

the port."

"From the pilot's point of view, that Downtown crossing is a disaster," said Bobby Parker of Collar Marine.

The state is examining the feasibility of a bridge linking Anchorage with Point MacKenzie. Two sites are being studied, one beginning Downtown near the port, and the other four miles farther north at Elmendorf Air Force Base.

Both shipping executives said they favored the Elmendorf location.

Their comments came Wednesday night at a meeting of the Anchorage chapter of the Propeller Club, a national organization of businesses connected with the

maritime industry.

In response to a preliminary environmental impact statement on the project, the Coast Guard said a Downtown bridge "would have a substantial risk of vessel collision."

To illustrate Tote's objections, Griffith pointed to a navigation chart that showed how Tote's ships turn in a wide arc as they pull into and out of the port. The Downtown bridge would force them to slice through the present turning arc, something Griffith said would be impossible when pack ice limits the ships' maneuverability.

Although the arm seldom freezes over, strong tides push and pull large ice accumulations past the port.

Traffic around the port is complicated by a narrow shipping channel which must be dredged regularly to remove buildups of silt dumped into the arm by several rivers.

"You cannot thread the needle in this area," Griffith said.

Parker said the difficulty of steering between bridge pilings would be aggravated because ships are less responsive when they are moving slowly.

Incoming ships would be slowing down to dock, and departing vessels wouldn't have had time to build up a head of steam by the time they reached the bridge, he explained.

When ice is heavy in the winter, Parker said, the ship's course is determined more by the movement of the ice in the harbor than by the pilot at the helm, he added.

Parker and Whittaker said they doubted that icebreaker tugboats would solve the navigational problems as has been suggested by the consulting firm of Sverdup & Parcel.

Ports elsewhere

Here is how the commissions are set up at the other big West Coast ports:

■ **LOS ANGELES:** The Port of Los Angeles is an arm of the city government. Port commissioners are appointed by the mayor and confirmed by the city council. They have no personal staff outside of some clerical assistance.

■ **LONG BEACH:** An independent city agency, the Port of Long Beach is governed by a board of commissioners appointed by the city manager and confirmed by the city council. An executive secretary acts as liaison between the board and the port staff, but commissioners have no personal aides outside of the general port staff.

■ **PORTLAND:** Oregon's governor appoints the commission that governs Port of Portland activities. The commissioners have no staff, relying instead upon the port's executive director for the information they need to set port policies.