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It's Yours for Just \$800

Citizens wanting a printed copy of the final Environmental Impact Statement on the proposed Bayport container port project are stunned to find that they must fork out a whopping \$800 for it.

"This is supposed to be a public document prepared by a government agency for citizen review," said Jim Blackburn, chair of the Galveston Bay Conservation and Preservation Association (GBCPA). "How can something costing \$800 be called public? It is far beyond the reach of nearly everyone."

Publication of the final Environmental Impact Statement is an administrative step required by law. It is not a permit for the project. Instead, the final EIS is intended to achieve public disclosure about the proposed project, so that citizens and resource agencies can comment on it.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers planned to deliver the Bayport final EIS to a select few recipients on May 15, with formal release scheduled for on May 16. The document consists of hundreds of pages in multiple volumes. The Corps has given citizens a comment period of 30 days, ending on June 16.

"This is not the end," said Blackburn. "This is where we are supposed to get to see the truth. We get only 30 days to respond, even though the Port and the Corps have taken fully four years to prepare this massive document." GBCPA has formally requested a 90-day extension of the comment period, to a total of 120 days.

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The final EIS was prepared for the Corps by the environmental consulting firm URS, with the work paid for by the permit applicant, the Port of Houston Authority. The Corps has indicated that the final EIS will be available on its website and in CD form.

GBCPA's Larry Tobin questions the usefulness of the electronic version, however. "Trying to read a very large document like this on a computer screen is a recipe for all kinds of frustration," he said.

"Navigating around it is intimidating," he added. "Getting an overall view is next to impossible. Maps and graphics present special complications. Most people simply are not equipped to handle this. People need to be able to see it in print."

Several other steps are still required before the Corps can reach a permit decision on the proposed project. One is a section 401 wetlands certification required from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, which recently held a hearing in Clear Lake City to gather public input on wetlands impacts of the Port's Bayport proposal. Another required step is that Coastal Coordination Council must sanction the final EIS as being consistent with the Coastal Management Plan for Texas.

Given the widespread public opposition to the project for environmental reasons and because it conflicts with existing residential land uses, GBCPA has indicated its intention to undertake legal action if the Corps does eventually issue a permit.

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