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Bayport Backgrounder

Media representatives can expect to receive glowing press statements from the Port of Houston Authority about the final Environmental Impact Statement recently released on its proposed container terminal at Bayport, as if this means the project is now a done deal.

Bayport is not a done deal, according to the Galveston Bay Conservation and Preservation Association (GBCPA). No permit has been issued, and other actions still pending are wetlands certification and review for compliance with the Coastal Management Plan. But glowing media outreach may indeed be all that the newspapers and TV stations ever receive on the final Environmental Impact Statement, if past experience is anything to go by.

When the draft EIS on the proposed Bayport project was published by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (the permitting agency) in November of 2001, it ran to 17,000 pages in six volumes. Printed copies of the enormous document were placed in a handful of local libraries for public access.

"We were astonished to receive a phone call from the *Chronicle* requesting a copy from us," said Larry Tobin of the Galveston Bay Conservation and Preservation Association (GBCPA). "The Corps did not even give the major metropolitan daily newspaper a copy of the draft EIS. How can newspapers do their job of keeping the public informed when they are left in the dark this way?"

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People had to pay \$190 for a printed copy of the draft EIS. An electronic version on a CD cost less, or the draft EIS could be accessed on the Corps' website, but many had difficulties with the digital material. The same now applies to the final EIS, priced at \$800.

"Even if the newspapers have copies, how realistic is it to expect busy press people to fight their way through hundreds of pages?" Tobin asked. "Circumstances are conspiring against responsible press coverage and sound information for the public."

By way of background, Tobin drew attention to several key factors. First, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has called Bayport the "most environmentally damaging" of all the sites under consideration for a Galveston Bay container port.

Second, Texas City has already received a permit to build a new container port much lower down the bay, where environmental impacts and would be low and no conflict arises with residents. Since the Texas City site started out as an alternative to Bayport, GBCPA suggests that a Bayport permit would now be illegal anyway.

Third, the Texas City project will move 2.4 million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) a year at a privately funded port on some 400 acres. The Bayport plan would move just 2.2 million TEUs at a 1,000-acre port built at public expense--with bonds backed by property tax dollars.

Finally, less than 10 percent of all Houston cargo is in containers. More than half of Houston's cargo is in liquid form--petroleum and refined petroleum products at private docks. The container trade is incidental to port primacy. (For fuller detail on all points, see publications at <http://www.gbcpa.net>)

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