

HOUSTON MATTERS

The future of southeast Harris County is at risk

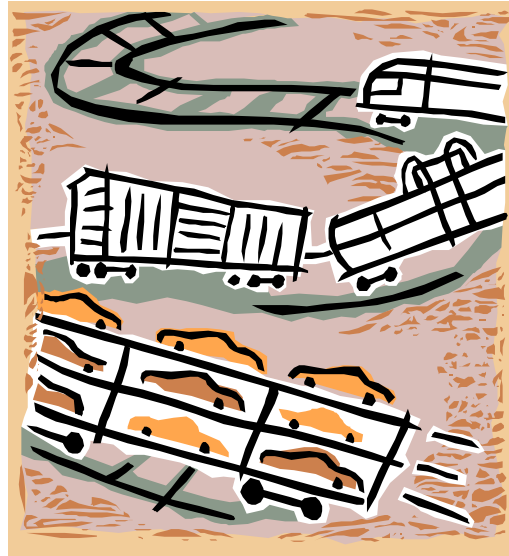
by STATE REP. JOHN DAVIS, STATE REP. RICK NORIEGA

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THE livelihood and security of residents of southeast Harris County are currently more threatened than at any time in memory. The past that we can remember. If the Bayport container project and the San Jacinto Rail project are permitted, residential development in the southeast part of the county may never recover.

Along Galveston Bay, the proposed Bayport container port threatens us with truck traffic and pollution, harm to wetlands and the bay and the loss of residential development. National security issues also are raised by the location and design of this port. The San Jacinto Rail Line is a new project that would bring hazardous chemicals adjacent to neighborhoods in Clear Lake and the East End community. Together, these two projects will drive a wedge into our residential areas, our homes, our neighborhoods - and destroy the dreams and aspirations of residents. We have been told that these projects have to occur at this time and at these locations. That is simply not true. This harm does not have to happen in order to have economic growth, development and competition. We need to be smart about growth. We need to protect our assets while attempting to create more capital. We cannot go forward by destroying what is good about our community. That is what we are doing.

Consider San Jacinto Rail. This rail line is being developed by chemical companies in partnership with the Burlington Northern-Santa Fe (BNSF)



railroad. We are told that the reason for the proposed San Jacinto Rail line is that the chemical companies need rate relief from Union Pacific, the only rail that currently serves the Bayport industrial area west of State Highway 146. We are sympathetic with this concern. However, these chemical companies have not asked Union Pacific to negotiate new rates with them, and the alternative exists for Burlington to negotiate access to existing Union Pacific rail lines. The point here is that alternative methods exist to solve this problem without disrupting residential development in Clear Lake and the East End. If San Jacinto Rail is built, it will disrupt the southerly development of Pasadena and the existing development in the East End and Clear Lake. Several schools are adjacent to this proposed rail line that would transport hazardous chemicals. Why should we risk our children's lives and the security of our neighborhoods

when we don't have to in order to achieve the goals of these companies? Similarly, the proposed Bayport container port does not have to be and should not be located at Bayport, where more than 5,000 people live within a mile. A private company has filed a permit application to construct a container port on Shoal Point in Texas City, a superior location. If the Port of Houston insists on spending taxpayer money for yet another container port, then it should be built on Spilman Island in the Houston Ship Channel next to the existing Barbour's Cut container port.



National security concerns also argue against the Bayport site. Containers provide the easiest means of delivering a weapon of mass destruction into the United States. We would be foolish not to consider these concerns in the construction of new container ports. Both Shoal Point and Spilman Island are superior to Bayport from a national security standpoint. They are isolated from the public and would only have a single way in and out. They could be secured more easily than the Bayport site, which is, of all things, proposed in conjunction with a cruise terminal. We need to get smart and get smart soon.

Neither San Jacinto Rail nor Bayport are smart proposals. They don't consider important new trends and information.

They don't protect our communities. They will disrupt our land-use patterns and forever change southeast Harris County for the worse. We need a Teddy Roosevelt in these difficult times. Students of history will recall that Roosevelt stood up for the public and split up the railroad monopolies at the beginning of the 20th century. Someone ought to sit the leadership of Union Pacific down in a room and not let them leave until we have some rate relief for these industries and/or access by BNSF to Union Pacific rail lines along SH 146. This would be similar to what another great leader - Jesse Jones - did with Houston banks to keep them from failing during the Depression. Someone ought to sit down and force the Port of Houston to go to Spilman Island for the good of our community.

It's hard to understand why our leaders are allowing southeast Harris County to be destroyed. We cannot and will not sit quietly by and let this happen without trying to save these areas. We would like to see someone standing with us at the federal level, speaking softly and carrying a big stick....and willing to use it.