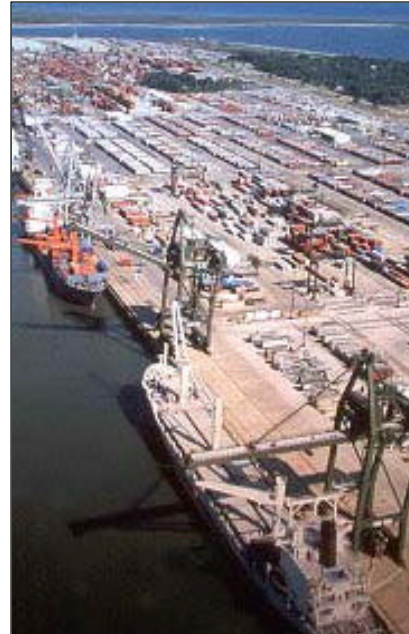


# **An opportunity to do regional port planning right**

By **NANCY R. EDMONSON**

Texas City recently received a permit from the U.S. Corps of Engineers for private developers to build a new container port at Shoal Point. We have container docks at Barbour's Cut, and the Port of Houston Authority proposes another publicly funded facility at Bayport. How many container ports does the Houston-Galveston region need? Where should they be located?



After the Bayport plan was announced in 1998, Texas City emerged as a possible alternative site. Now the Port Authority claims we need both immediately, even though Shoal Point's capacity is greater than that projected for Bayport. Claiming we need both sounds dangerously like jurisdictional pride rather than intelligent regional planning.

Shoal Point quickly got a go-ahead because it is well-located, with good rail and roadway access and capacity. Remote from residential and recreational areas, it is on a dredge spoil disposal area where the environmental impacts of port development will be low. The new port will relieve pressure at existing container docks, and it will provide the economic stimulus of additional port capacity within the Houston-Galveston region. Hence we have a perfect opportunity to reconsider our long-range options for how port traffic will dovetail with the regional transportation network.

Every city with a major port faces problems accommodating many more trucks and trains when port facilities expand. A good regional port plan would look at road and rail requirements for container shipping more than at least 30 years. It would take into account the need for water 50 feet deep and for proximity to the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway, allowing barges to move containers destined outside the Houston region. Realistic estimates of market potential would include projections of the amount of goods with Houston as their final destination.

A long-range regional plan would look at sites that fit these port requirements while also minimizing the additional public infrastructure investment needed to serve port facilities - - primarily roads and rail. Impacts on the environment and surrounding communities need to be minimized as well. A good plan would move beyond the constraints of political boundaries and local fiefdoms to determine what makes sense for the region as a whole.

The Port of Houston Authority's proposed Bayport Container Terminal does not fit into a good regional plan. Indeed, the port bought that land a decade ago for dredge spoil

disposal, not for container docks. The site is poorly located for maximum use of existing transportation infrastructure. The Bayport proposal calls for 7,000 additional heavy trucks to rumble right through the metropolitan area every day of the year. Eight trains per day - - each 8,000 feet long -- would intensify congestion along the rail corridor to the busy East End rail hub.

Our roads and rails would be clogged with cargo destined for distant cities-- cargo that need never enter Houston at all.

Economic growth would be stymied in multiple ways. Limited regional transportation funds would be sucked up to rescue the Port of Houston Authority from a bad location decision. The additional pressure of a major port facility on local air quality -- ships, trucks, trains and port equipment all run on diesel fuel -- would compromise industry's options. The estuarine and recreational asset Galveston Bay provides for the entire region would be jeopardized by a new port so far up the Ship Channel. A major new facility at Bayport would be environmentally damaging and would devastate currently flourishing residential communities.

Far from being a slap in the face for Houston, the Texas City permit means we can think again while Shoal Point is being built. With a regional approach, we can avoid magnifying our transportation problems. A coordinated port plan may call for creating a regional port authority. Redesign can improve efficiency at Barbour's Cut. Limited development of neighboring Spilman's Island may be an answer if additional capacity is needed on the upper bay for goods going only to Houston. Implementing a regional concept for the upper Texas coast might include a new megaport at Pelican Island, in Brazoria County, or even at Port Arthur.

For a century, steadily enlarging our Ship Channel, highways and railroads has kept us competitive in transportation. But we have entered a new era. We must do better, not just do more. Holding our transportation lead calls for imaginative solutions. Now we have the opportunity as a region to do the right thing economically and environmentally. Let us not allow stubborn territoriality to trip us up.

*Edmonson is mayor of the city of Shoreacres in southeast Harris County.*

*Reprint from Houston Chronicle, Outlook, May 11, 2003*