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Cities Oppose Bayport, Promote Wetlands

At the recent State of the Bay symposium held in League City, five cities near Galveston Bay showcased efforts to conserve wetlands and ensure public access to the natural waterfront.



At the same meeting, three cities cried foul regarding the Port of Houston Authority's proposed Bayport container *megaport* and the negative impacts it would have for the area.

"People are pressing for more active efforts to maintain Galveston Bay as a natural asset and a community resource," said Jim Blackburn, chair of the Galveston Bay Conservation and Preservation Association. "And not a

moment too soon. Our rich estuary cannot be expected to survive endless urban-industrial assault."

Held every other year, the State of the Bay Symposium is organized by the Galveston Bay Estuary Program under the umbrella of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. This year's meeting, the sixth, was held January 14-16 and was focused on the future of the bay under the theme "Local Communities Leading the Way."

Presenters expressing citizen opposition to Bayport as the site for a new container terminal were Seabrook's Mayor Robin Riley and City Council member Mike Laible, Mayor Nancy Edmonson of Shoreacres, and Mayor Natalie O'Neill of Taylor Lake Village.

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Edmonson noted how difficult it is for a small community like Shoreacres, with only 1,500 people and limited finances, to resist wealthier and much more powerful players like the Port of Houston Authority. "Small town governments do not have the resources . . . or organizations in place to fight very long and protracted battles, and the resource agencies charged with protecting the environment appear inaccessible or politically hogtied," she said.

But she went on to identify a "toolbox" of federal and state laws that smaller municipalities can use to fend off projects with impacts dangerous for the bay and surrounding communities. Prime examples are the Clean Water Act and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which mandates the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process. "I cannot emphasize enough that the power of these tools is magnified by intergovernmental and interagency cooperation," said Edmonson.

Mayor Natalie O'Neill of Taylor Lake Village gave a poster presentation titled "So the Mayors Went to See the

Colonel," showing the timing of various actions on Bayport by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (the permitting agency) and the cities fighting the plan. Escalating opposition to the container port has produced a series of resolutions by city councils and a collective commitment to funding technical studies.

The effort eventually led to a joint visit to the Galveston District commander of the Corps by State Senator Mike Jackson, aides to State Representatives John Davis and U. S. Congressman Nick Lampson, and the mayors or official representatives of six cities--Pasadena, La Porte, Seabrook, Taylor Lake Village, Shoreacres, and El Lago. Together they pressed concerns about inadequacies in the Draft EIS on Bayport. "We all raised questions about the NEPA process and requested a Supplemental EIS," said O'Neill.

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Mayor Riley of Seabrook outlined ecotourism initiatives in his city, which has several large, wild parks, 11 miles of waterfront, and a trails network connecting the parks. He described residents' anger at finding the city under the threat of industrial sprawl when the Bayport proposal was announced, and how this galvanized the community into resisting this site for a container port.

Speakers from Houston, League City, and Webster all described large-scale projects to preserve remaining undeveloped sections of riparian (streamside) habitat in a natural condition. League City has acquired land along the south shore of Clear Creek near I-45 and plans to keep it natural.

Webster's plans involve the opposite shore of Clear Creek, meaning that both banks will be conserved. Sizable and functioning woodland and marshland components in the heart of

the Clear Lake City area are important factors enhancing the area's quality of life and long-term prospects for outdoor recreation and wildlife.

Pearland's Southwest Environmental Center is a multi-use development centered on wastewater treatment and flood control but also emphasizing open space, wildlife habitat, and outdoor recreation. Seabrook City Councilman Mike Laible described his city's inventory of wetlands and conservation efforts aiming to retain quality of life for residents and boost ecotourism potential. The first major project involves restoration of productive marshland in the shallow waters between the bay and Highway 146 near the Kemah Bridge.

"Every natural wetland acre cleans and filters urban runoff," said Blackburn. "All these projects make positive contributions to the health of the bay and its tributary waterways."