

Seeking the Port in Portland

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Since the 1600's when the first Europeans sailed into what would someday be called the Fore River, people have recognized the value of this beautiful natural harbor known today as the City's Department of Transportation and Waterfront. From these shores settlers fished and carried goods to and from the Old World long before we had become a nation. The wood from these shores became the hulls and masts of great ships, and the fledgling city of Portland grew in wealth and importance because of its connections to the sea.

In the middle of the 1800's, Portland reached beyond its borders to become the ice free port for Montreal Canada, developing as a railroad hub and major East Coast seaport. When the port began to grow beyond its boundaries, hulks of abandoned ships were dragged into the Fore Street berths and filled with sand and stone to create a new seaport district which today is called Commercial Street. Railroads from the south connected in Portland to the railroads heading north. Cargo ships from all over the world brought trade into Maine's fastest growing city and moved to and from Canada and all of New England by railroad, making the seaport a major trading center. Passengers arriving by railroad took steamships up the coast and to Nova Scotia on vacations and for business. Fishing also thrived and hundreds of fishing boats brought the wealth of the Atlantic from the Gulf of Maine and George's Bank back to the harbor.

At the end of the First World War some industries in the port began to see a decline as Canada developed its own ports. Fishing still thrived, the passenger trade remained strong, and by World War II shipbuilding became a more significant marine industry in the harbor. Like many other seaports after the war, cargo volumes began to decline and by the 1960's, many of the freighters that once unloaded cargo at Portland's piers disappeared as goods were packed into containers and moved through larger seaports further south. Shipbuilding had also disappeared and Portland began to see a dramatic decline in its waterfront. Only the fishing industry remained strong, keeping the city's economy tied to its maritime roots.

In the late 1970's a new renaissance began to develop. A European businessman selected Portland as a homeport, recreating the international ferry service that had been absent for decades. A new pipeline to Canada starting in South Portland joined the rail line moving crude oil to refineries in Quebec. Bath Iron Works established a ship repair facility at the unused Maine State Pier employing hundreds of shipbuilders in commercial and military activities. The city began to invest in other waterfront areas, and in the 20 years that followed, created a new municipal pier for the fishing community with the America's first public display fish auction. Property owners began to rebuild piers and the ferry service serving the islands was given a new home and modern terminal. The Old

Port District, long derelict, began to revive as real estate investment revitalized the downtown area.

And then the inevitable happened. The forces of economic development and the users of the working waterfront collided head on in a battle for the valuable property along the water's edge. Condominiums began to replace marine industries on berths and yachts displaced fishing boats. The battle became intense, finally involving the entire City as residents were asked to go to the polls and decide on if the City should restrict non-maritime development on the waterfront. When the smoke finally cleared, City leaders were given a mandate and restrictive zoning was put in place providing protection for traditional marine industries including cargo and fishing. However, that was then and this is now.

In over a decade since the zoning was put in place, the waterfront of Portland has to the surprise of some continued to thrive. Portland handled the largest number of international passengers in New England last year, over 200,000 on cruise ships. The fishing industry, still facing restrictions, has rebounded with the largest landings seen in a number of years. Bulk and container cargo continue to grow to the point that two years ago, mostly due to the pipeline in South Portland, the City's Department of Transportation and Waterfront became the largest tonnage port in New England handling triple Boston's tonnage. The port continues its tradition of providing cargo to Canada, now in the form of oil, making it the second largest oil port on the U.S. East Coast. It is estimated that the port industry here has an economic impact of more than half a billion dollars to the Maine economy.

In the midst of all of this success however, an old debate is starting anew: the value of waterfront property and its highest and best use. Last year Bath Iron Works, who had leased a prime piece of waterfront property from the City, decided to undergo a significant expansion at its main facility in Bath. They advised the City they would not be renewing their lease, which delighted Portlanders who had some other ideas. Many saw the property as the perfect place to build a new cruise ship terminal to accommodate the City's growing business, which had tripled, in recent years. They also saw the opportunity to combine those operations with those of the international ferry, freeing up land on another part of the waterfront for cargo expansion. It also provided an opportunity for the City to expand the island ferry terminal that was built to handle 500,000 passengers annually but was now handling over a million.

So with that in mind, the City went to the State of Maine and asked to be included in a statewide transportation bond bill. As a result of overwhelming passage by the citizens of the state, the City was given an initial allocation of \$15.5 million, which combined with City funds, was enough to start Phase 1 of the twenty-year project.

"Not so fast," came the cry from those who finally realized that the City might build something they had planned for several years with significant public involvement. This time the question did not revolve around rebuilding derelict properties but instead about reusing a prime piece of waterfront real estate zoned for marine use which had the potential to be used for new waterfront development. Many saw the site, with stunning vistas of Casco Bay, as becoming a keystone of new public activity with retail, commercial and open space. Ultimately, the entire project could cost over a hundred million dollars and some City officials saw the opportunity to attract private investment to pay for a substantial part of the project.

Others recognized the opportunity to scrap the restrictive zoning, which had marginalized the return to owners on some properties. Ironically the City found itself in the same situation the private property owners were in, as they thought about attracting private investment under zoning that only permitted marine use. As speculators began to see the drama unfold, values on commercial and residential properties began to soar. The Casco Bay Islanders who viewed the property as their front door and the mainland residents who viewed the property as being in their back yard began to express dire concern about the impacts on their lives. Some predicted there would be blood on the water before this prime piece of deep-water real estate was wasted on just ships. That in turn caught the attention of the maritime community and thus the drama began.

In this community of 65,000 people, the City's elected officials and staff are faced with an interesting problem that makes Portland special among port cities. How do you balance the thriving working waterfront, where more people are employed than in the high tech industry, with all the other demands of the public? That includes the open space that gives Portland its unique character as well as private development that generates tax revenue needed in a City facing fiscal challenges. And how do you do that in a waterfront that is less than 3 miles long?

Many cities like Portland that had once been important seaports have all but lost their working waterfront. Pressure from developers over the years pushed many faltering marine industries out of business as hotels, shops, restaurants and bars took over what had once been active piers. Time and time again, cities saw the benefits of allowing shoreline properties to achieve their highest and best use through real estate development. Waterfronts became active places again, taxes filled city coffers and the stench and decay of the old ports gave way to a wave of upscale eateries and pricey boutiques.

Portland rarely follows the same road as everyone else. At a time when waterfront development was the rage and the City's historic Old Port district was seeing an unparalleled revitalization, the citizens of Portland collectively halted the wave of change that would have dismantled the seaport. In spite of those

who predicted doom and gloom, the restrictive zoning that was put in place worked and the waterfront industries today are healthy. The character of the City attracts those who are impressed by the mix of ships, fish processing, restaurants, pubs and shops that have grown together over the years. There is however an uneasy truce. Where places to eat fish come in contact with places that unload fish, patrons and fisherman stare at each other and wonder about the future. Traffic and tourists interfere with trucks delivering cargo and supplies to vessels and taking fish from processors. The return of the BIW site and the City's plans are firing up the old issues once again as everyone wonders how all of the interests will co-exist.

The return to the City of the BIW property has sparked many new dreams. Trying to turn a dream into reality without a plan often results in a nightmare. Under the leadership of various City Councilors, two committees are working to redesign not only the waterfront as part of a full scale master planning process, but also the facility many hope will replace the closing shipyard. Discussions about preserving marine industries while allowing mixed compatible development are taking place. Considerations regarding the growing tourism industry, which is replacing many industries in the State, are being looked at. People are awed by the presence of some of the most elegant cruise ships in the world, bringing passengers not only into Portland, but onto Kennebunk and Freeport as well. Officials are excited that tourists are arriving by ship, although many first time visitors say they will someday return by car. In the process, everyone has an opinion and the City is doing its very best to make sure everyone is heard.

The challenges are significant and the questions that need to be answered are not simple. Should deepwater sites in Portland be restricted to marine use only? Can mixed use be permitted and how will that impact the working waterfront? Is the proposed aquarium, next to the City's Fish Pier, the best use for the closing Naval Reserve property when the fishing industry is expanding? Is marine industrial the best use for 51 acres of land now lying vacant west of the Casco Bay Bridge? Should bars and restaurants be permitted to be built on piers when property owners are having a difficult time paying for costly repairs? How will the City resolve the issues of truck, car, and pedestrian traffic on congested Commercial Street? The number of questions are exhaustive and the number of stakeholders impacted endless, yet all of their interests must be taken into account as planning moves forward.

That is really the most unique thing about Portland. Where many communities see the control of planning efforts in the hands of powerful politicians or wealthy developers, Portland still makes its decisions through public forums. Everyone still has a voice and the greatest challenge before elected officials' remains finding as much consensus as possible among thousands of voices.

The challenge is great for this small community. Portland is a city of and from the sea. Her sons and daughters have followed the ways of the water since well before this nation was born. Portland was one of the first ports in America and it pumped life into the fledgling colonies. Every type of product moved across her piers and that has not changed in over four hundred years. For many, keeping the "Port" in Portland is what makes the City special and ultimately, from where we derive our identity.

Although the process has often been heated, much progress has been made. There are a number of well thought out plans for a new marine facility to handle passengers. The realization that these types of facilities can exist with compatible development is being apparent. Serious discussions regarding transportation, new cargo facilities, roadways, open space, and tourism based opportunities are included in a process that will shape the future of Portland's waterfront for the next fifty years. In the middle of all of the discussion is the one thread that keeps us in this community working together. How do we preserve our way and quality of life?

When folks from Portland began looking around to see what others had done, they realized that there were few examples to follow. Portland found itself on the cutting edge in trying to balance all it had to deal with. While the next act of this drama is being played out, people will need to realize it is bigger than where you put the cargo or the international ferry or allow development to occur. Its about how this entire community can work together to preserve what is most dear to us, how we choose to live.

Planning the Portland waterfront began in the days when the settlement was called Falmouth. It is a dynamic and continuous process that will continue well into the future. In the last two decades, the community has undertaken a major study or initiative on its waterfront every year. Many plans have been put into place, new facilities developed, and our marine industries today are a major part of the City's economic health. In that same time period, development has taken derelict buildings and streets and transformed them into a living community. The redevelopment of Portland's East End on twenty-four acres of prime waterfront real estate is just one more challenge that Portlanders will face with the same determination and fortitude that they have mustered over the years. In the end, I am confident that we will come to terms with the opportunity before us as we as a community seek the port in Portland. I hope most will say what I do when I walk down Commercial Street or across the BIW property that I hope will become a gemstone of our harbor, "What a glorious place!"