

Daphne Bramham: The port wants more land, but so does everyone else

It's time to consider other options to Port Metro Vancouver's continuing expansion

BY DAPHNE BRAMHAM, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST JANUARY 26, 2016



Port Metro Vancouver seems focused on finding more industrial land to facilitate expansion.

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Port Metro Vancouver is Canada's Asia-Pacific gateway and its biggest port, and it's running out of industrial land.

For the port to grow, CEO Robin Silvester needs to figure out how to get more land.

In Silvester's perfect world, the solution would be simple. British Columbia and the Metro Vancouver municipalities would designate land for industrial use, just as back in 1973 Dave Barrett's NDP government recognized the importance of food production and set up the Agricultural Land Reserve to protect some of this country's richest farmland.

Designating land for industrial use would eliminate the region's mad competition for a scarce resource. And heaven knows, there's a lot of competition.

There are housing developers, marina owners, recreational boaters. There are high-tech companies, creative industries and other businesses unrelated to the port that are also desperately seeking land and office space to set up on and grow their companies.

There are First Nations whose claims to all of this land have never been settled.

There are farmers trying to hold on to agricultural land that's deemed some of the best in Canada.

And municipal leaders, community groups and residents are furious that once the federally owned and controlled port authority buys property, it doesn't have to comply with any local zoning regulations.

It is the port's plan convert a 36-hectare farm into a logistics centre that prompted Richmond Mayor Malcolm Brodie to say that the port has declared war on agricultural land.

The port's mandate is to facilitate and enable Canada's trade in the national interest. It's supposed to do it in an environmentally sustainable way in consultation with local communities.

But Port Metro's board is heavily weighted to industrial users and its current direction seems focused on continued expansion.

Silvester's frustration is evident in his voice when he explains one more time that with only 405 hectares of industrial land left, port-related industries will have nowhere to go within 10 years; that port-related activities provide jobs for 70,000 people at wages that are 50-per-cent above the national average.

Without more industrial land here, he says those companies and those jobs will migrate to Calgary or somewhere else.

Without continued expansion of the port and its related activities, Silvester warns that Metro Vancouver will end up like Florida — a nice place for rich people to have their second or third homes. But this dire scenario is predicated on the premise that the region's future is the same as its past — that Metro Vancouver is a well-placed trans-shipment hub for resources to be exported to Asia and for finished products from Asia to be landed and distributed.

Metro Vancouver becoming Canada's Florida ignores another entirely different reality. That reality is that the prosperity of major urban areas already depends more on their ability to become "brain hubs" (universities, colleges, creative industries, scientists and so on) than on their ports, manufacturing plants and physical distribution centres. And it's true even for port cities like San Francisco and Singapore.

There's another consideration as well: climate change.

The unprecedented drought and water shortages in the southwestern United States have driven the price of even unloved cauliflower up to gourmet prices. The rich delta lands of the Fraser River are never going to make the region food self-sufficient. But as Brodie and others point out, shouldn't we at least consider that every little bit counts?

(Silvester's rather quixotic response to this is that 24 million tonnes of grain are shipped from here annually, which is enough to feed 250 million people overseas.)

Climate change and rising sea levels are already affecting municipalities on the North Shore as well as in Richmond, Delta, Vancouver and Surrey.

The best information available suggests that by the turn of the next century, the sea level could be as much as 1.2 metres higher, flooding many parts of the Lower Mainland.

The National Roundtable on the Environment and Economy predicts that by 2050, damage from sea-level rise in British Columbia could cost between \$2.1 billion and \$7.6 billion, with the damage centred in Metro Vancouver.

(Summaries of the studies that have been done with links to them are at <https://www.sfu.ca/rise/research.html>)

Beyond that, there's the earthquake risk.

Before any decisions are made about provincial designated industrial zones or further expansions of the port, it's time to have a serious discussion about the future.

Does it make sense to take agricultural land out of production for a port?

Does it make sense to further reduce land for housing and other economic activity to serve the port?

Does it make sense to continue to expand Canada's Asian gateway in a region that is at ever increasing risk of being underwater?

It's time — both in the national and regional interest — to at least consider other options, including further expansion of the port at Prince Rupert.

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