

# LIVING WITH A GHASTLY SECRET



DALE FLOWERS

In 1972, President Richard Nixon declared that the lower Columbia River was slated to be "the light metals capitol of the world," comparable to the heavy metals Ruhr valley in Germany. Wall to wall aluminum smelters were envisioned for both sides of the Columbia. An outfit named Amax wanted to be the first built, but its plans and inevitably the entire grand concept was foiled by a piqued and persistent groundswell of grassroots opposition.

A threat at least as ominous and seemingly omnipotent has quite suddenly appeared in the form of corporate liquefied natural gas incursion into the same area of the lower Columbia. Four LNG syndicates intend to construct terminals to receive imports of natural gas. An initial application to lease property on the Skipanon Peninsula for a terminal was underhanded and secretive, which involved the silent complicity of the Port of Astoria commission. Almost immediately, the other three companies shocked local residents by announcing their own ambitions to build LNG terminals in the neighborhood.

Peter Huhtala wrote the following article for HipFish (its splendid January 2005 issue that featured several articles about probable consequences of the proposed LNG nightmare and inspired the Dale Flowers drawing on this page). It is reprinted here with his consent. He is an Astoria native with family ties to the lower Columbia River stretching back a century. He works in the field of marine conservation, advocating on the West Coast and nationally in support of sustainable fisheries and healthy coastal economies. He is a member of Salmon For All and is a candidate for the May 17 election for Clatsop County Port Commissioner. ~MPMc

## BY PETER HUHTALA

For three months it was a well-kept secret. Few other than the Port of Astoria Commissioners and selected local elected officials from Warrenton, Astoria and Clatsop County (and some of their staff) knew the truth. They kept their lips sealed. A half-billion dollar investment was at stake, with tax revenues a-go-go. And what's more: family wage jobs! It was

## POLICE ERROR

The city of Astoria recently experienced two attempted armed robberies in a single day, the first at a minimart and the second at a cigarette store. The bandit seemed to get away without any loot though he frightened the people he intended to rob by pointing a gun at their heads.

Very soon police from the state, county and city were dashing around Astoria looking for the suspect, described as being tall, stocky and goateed, wearing a yellow jacket.

I don't know how many local citizens were rousted by police, but my friend Robert Wilson was surrounded by cops while walking near the riverfront. He is not tall nor goateed, although he is muscular; and he was wearing a yellow jacket with a Columbia River Bar Pilots logo given to him by deceased bar pilot Paul Jackson. The cops pointed their guns at Wilson and forced him to lay face down on the rain-wet ground, and handcuffed him, saying he was *not* under arrest. He was taken to a witness, a woman who had been a victim of the robber. She looked at Wilson, said to the cops, "You're not even close," and walked away.

Robert Wilson is an ex-Marine veteran of the Vietnam War and founder of the Astoria chapter of Vietnam Veterans Against the War in the early 1970s. He has lived in Astoria for more than thirty years, most of that time working as a deepsea commercial fisherman. He has two degrees in marine science and biology and is the artist of two very popular sealife charts. He is also an infrequent contributor to this newspaper, his latest a 4-page illustrated supplement of dolphins and sea turtles for the *Times Eagle's* 25th anniversary issue last summer.

He is quite angry at the way the police roughed him around, without even apologizing to him when he was released. He is aware they were probably afraid because the would-be robber was considered "armed and dangerous," but he feels the treatment he received was unnecessarily harsh and dangerously contemptuous of his civil rights.

~MICHAEL McCUSKER

better to keep quiet, lest the not-in-our-backyard folks muck up a good thing. The cryogenic goldrush was heading for the Skipanon Peninsula.

Three days after the Presidential election, the Port of Astoria convened a special meeting and granted a 60-year lease for 96 acres of the Skipanon Peninsula to a limited liability corporation (Skipanon-LLC) set up by an energy company called Calpine, for the purpose of bringing in mass quantities of super-cooled liquefied natural gas (LNG).

Earlier in 2004, Calpine Corporation had withdrawn plans to build a similar LNG import terminal near Eureka, California. Fierce local opposition from fishermen, downtown business owners and conservationists forced the project to be shelved before a lease could be signed. Not so in Clatsop County, Oregon. Sure there is community opposition, now that the citizens know about Calpine's proposal. But that lease got signed a full two days after the Port of Astoria let the press know that a lease was under consideration. Calpine had control of the property.

In this cryogenic goldrush, as in any other, control of property is essential if the riches are to be tapped. Calpine "staked their claim" to the Skipanon Peninsula. At least three other competitors are working to secure viable LNG importing sites in the lower Columbia River. Calpine knows that only one such facility, at most, might be granted permits by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC).\*

The Port chose not to wait for a regularly-scheduled meeting to address the LNG issue, and didn't take the time to first fully inform the public as to the possible consequences of their action. As a result, many local citizens were outraged. When the Port and Calpine held meetings after the lease decision was made, the outcry at backroom politics cozying up to big bucks almost overshadowed the trepidation over the dangers of the project. The process to this point, even more than Calpine's project, has divided the community.

Peter Gearin, executive director of the Port of Astoria, defended the Port's handling of the situation in a letter to *The Daily Astorian* saying, "In making its decision to follow normal and legal public process, not more, to lease the site to Calpine, the commissioners did so with an understanding that site control was the mechanism by which Calpine could assess the feasibility of the site, and that many different permits must be filed and approved by a variety of public agencies, each with their own input process opportunities."

Big projects like this require numerous approvals at the local, state and federal levels, right? Wrong.

The FERC insists that the federal government has sole siting authority over LNG import terminals. This doctrine of federal preemption is being challenged in court by the State of California, but right now, according to the Bush administration, Oregon, let alone Clatsop County or Warrenton, has zero control

over whether Skipanon-LLC is allowed to build its LNG receiving station. If Calpine applies to Oregon's Energy Facility Siting Council and Oregon disagrees with the FERC, the feds win. Period.

Recently, dozens of proposals for LNG plants have surfaced nationwide. Coastal areas of lower population in particular are being targeted, partly because Congress has clearly stated a preference that these facilities are to be sited "remotely." Another motive for choosing small towns was offered by Mayor Ed Lambert of Fall River, Massachusetts, a city where LNG import is muscling in despite local opposition. Mayor Lambert said, "I think it is no accident that the industry has chosen places like Fall River, which tend to be lower-income, working class communities where they don't expect educated local opposition."

Remote siting sure sounds good to me after reading the December 2004 report by Sandia National Laboratories that depicts possible, though "not likely" events that could cause LNG to spill from a tanker which would then boil and ignite, melting steel a half mile away, and burning buildings and people more than a mile distant. And then there are the suffocating gas vapor clouds that could drift much further until they burst into a dramatic inferno.

But barring an unusual accident, sabotage or terrorism, what might it be like living with an LNG import terminal in our midst? Why might the Port of Astoria have considered a more extensive public process, or even some preservation of local control, before capitulating to Calpine's insistence that they *must* have control of the property?

Well, there is this matter of "exclusion" zones, otherwise known as "safety" or "security" zones. These zones are designed to keep terrorists, crazy people, sloppy boaters and idiots away from the LNG tankers and storage tanks. As they near the LNG facility near Kenai, Alaska, vessels must give the LNG tankers 1000 yards of clearance. When LNG tankers roll toward Boston Harbor, all maritime traffic is cleared for two miles ahead and 1000 yards to the side, the bridge is closed and aircraft are barred from the vicinity.\*\*

One thousand yards. It seems like a considerable distance until you start to think about steel melting at a half mile, or flesh frying at twice that far — heck, at four miles if you believe some studies.

There is no reason to believe that a 1000-yard clearance from these terrorist targets would not be required by Homeland Security, and plenty of reasons why the space between these behemoth (900-1200 feet long) LNG tankers and other ships, pleasure craft and fishing vessels should not be considerably farther. Commercial fishing, shipping and enjoyment of the wonders of the mouth of the Columbia River would have to wait — actually some would have to flee — as LNG tankers and their armada of gunboats take the river. (Escorts of up to half a dozen Coast Guard vessels accompany LNG tankers approaching other ports, along with two or three powerful tugs.)

At least four times a week the Columbia River entrance channel would be closed, along with much of the lower river fishing and crabbing ground. Homeland Security could also prohibit access to Warrenton Harbor while tankers are at the dock.

Well, there is one bit of adjustment we would have to make — subjugating all commercial and recreational maritime traffic on the river in deference to the LNG gold.

Calpine Corporation has not yet fully disclosed the pollution that would accompany their 50 to 75 job producing enterprise. What Calpine suggests is to build a 150-megawatt gas-fired power plant to warm up the LNG even as it produces electricity. This plant and its associated activities would be the largest single source of air pollution in Clatsop County.

Much of the pollution generated by this plant would severely harm our most vulnerable people — the very young and the elderly. We could expect, based on similar proposals, that 100,000 pounds of nitrogen oxides (which form corrosive nitrite acid when combined with water) would be released from the power plant each year. Twenty thousand pounds of volatile organic compounds (VOCs), such as cancer-causing Benzene, would be dumped in the air, along with 64,000 pounds of tiny, and potentially toxic particulates called PM-10.

Huge amounts more air pollution would come from the 100 tons of fuel per day the LNG tankers burn while in port, as well as from the diesel exhaust spewed by support craft.

Okay, that is another change in lifestyle that we might not get to choose — inhaling toxic fumes that cause asthma and cancer.

Unfortunately, I can't help but imagine the easy transition from the government secrecy we have already observed to government oppression in the name of security. As with the periodic shipments of LNG to the Boston area, there is no reason to believe that armed guards will not line the shores of our communities as the LNG tankers come and go.

The Sandia National Laboratories report "enhanced" security measures as the primary means to reduce the chances of an intentional LNG spill and fire.

What do you think: would this police-state security encourage desirable tourism and clean, safe business and industry?

Aside from effectively abdicating local control over public safety issues surrounding LNG import, the Port of Astoria Commission left at least three areas of local concern to the whim of the federal government. Traditional maritime traffic, whether for business or pleasure would need to defer to petrochemical transport. The air quality of our area would be substantially degraded and the health of many of our citizens sacrificed. And our freedom to visit the waterfronts of the region would be tempered by the presence of security forces with automatic weapons.

There are local issues that concern the quality of our life and the nature of economic activity we want to encourage. No federal agency should make those decisions on our behalf. It is up to us to insist that those we have elected, including the Port of Astoria commissioners, take a powerful stand to defend our values. Our leaders must forthrightly acknowledge that shutting the public out of the process before leasing public property for a dangerous and outrageously controversial enterprise was a ghastly mistake.

\*Editor's Note: This might be a shell game to soften up the public into resignedly accepting a single LNG terminal rather than deal with an overwhelming four.

\*\*Boston's Mayor has so far unsuccessfully attempted to have the LNG facility removed.