

DRAWING BY TOM BURGESS

THE PEOPLE VERSUS LNG

BY TOM DUNCAN

Everyone wants economic development and a better world for their children and grandchildren, but beyond that there is less agreement about what that means exactly.

Although we are all different in many ways, we still share the same world, and so conflict is unavoidable. Conflict isn't necessarily "negative" or something to be avoided — there is no progress without conflict and revolution — and as Donald Rumsfeld famously observed, "Democracy is messy." Still, the conflict has to be contained and directed to positive ends if democratic civilization is to persist — and that is the challenge of boards and commissions.

It is pretty much obvious that the era of cheap energy is over. At the beginning of the United States, energy was essentially free. Water power, coal, natural gas and oil were just there, essentially for the taking, and there was enough to power

a dynamic USA to superpower status. But now, we are in conflict over energy.

In 2005, even the most optimistic experts agree that North American energy supplies are maxed out, and even in decline. Increasingly, we require energy from sources in unstable and hostile areas of the world, and the cost of that energy — in treasure and blood — is getting higher. If our economy is to remain stable, let alone grow, we must make some difficult choices about sources and use of energy.

The basic questions — who profits? who pays? — have yet to be answered in the case of liquefied natural gas. It is reasonable for the public to expect to get accurate technical and engineering answers to our questions from industry sources, but they aren't likely to be a very good source for cost-benefit analysis from the public's point of view. It is not reasonable to expect the industry to be concerned about the "common good" — even if that could be defined — over the needs of their shareholders. That is not how one does business, even in the most enlightened companies. They must vote their balance sheet — and in the short term. That is why we need a viable political system — one that doesn't shy from conflict. The people, not the corporations, are responsible for the long-term view.

The U.S. Constitution makes "the people" sovereign. But that doesn't guarantee that the people will always win. "Sovereignty" is not absolute power — if it was, King George III would have destroyed the American revolutionaries. He didn't,

and now we are stuck with an excruciatingly slow, seemingly inefficient political process to determine the "will" of the people. Armed with that will, the sovereign "people" must still compete in the real world of power politics with the "will" of the corporate shareholders and the "will" of powerful individuals for the control of resources — and the outcome is far from certain.

There are sensible alternatives to foreign oil and gas that will help us build a strong community and develop a solid economy that can last for generations — not just the thirty to fifty years that are predicted for natural gas supplies. Check out www.columbiarivervision.org, the Web site of a local group RiverVision, for more information and links to the world of energy.

Tom Duncan is a medical doctor living in Astoria. He and Susan Skinner are partners in the Lower Columbia Medical Clinic and are members of RiverVision, a group formed to challenge the politics and purpose of constructing liquid natural gas terminals in the lower Columbia River.

STEWARDS OF THE RIVER

What should we do about LNG? The question is part of a larger one — what should we do with our home landscape, the one for which we are the appointed stewards?

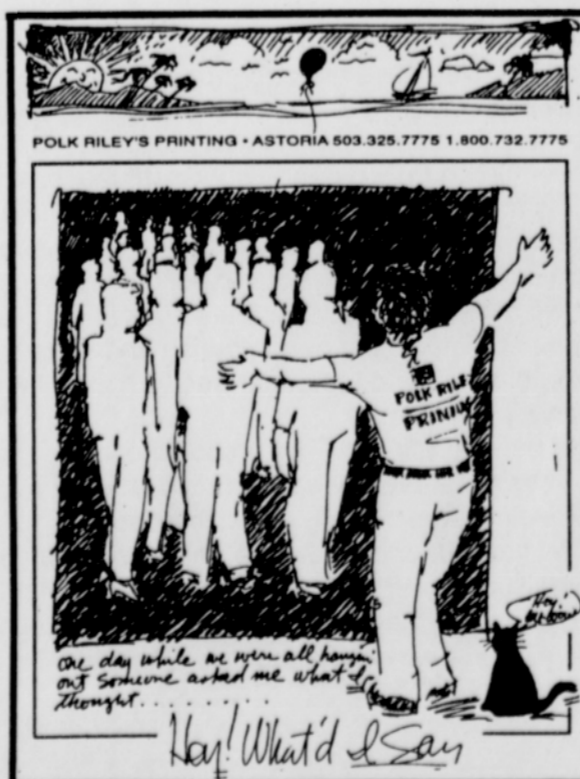
Most of us find that the best thing about Warrenton and Astoria is their location next to the River. From it we are allowed views that strengthen us and make us more considerate. We can't always explain how or why this happens, and we can't quantify it, but we are grateful. Even our silence can express that.

To be thankful makes us conservative, in the old, true sense of that word. We want to be sure to protect a precious gift. There is currently a proposal, for example, to place art along the River Walk, an idea put forward by good people with good intentions. But is it a good idea, given the absence of any appropriately strict methods for soliciting and siting first quality public art? (One thinks with embarrassment of the wooden Indian head, and the cement park at 9th Street.)

It should be difficult to win the right to build at the River's edge. For now however, unfortunately, the main requirement is just to bring money. Corporations wanting to develop LNG terminals bring lots of money, but they are bankrupt of more important qualifications — humility, civic concern, a love for the natural geography, and, yes, reverence for its creator.

~ROBERT ADAMS

Robert Adams is a great American photographer who lives in Astoria.



LNG IS AN ALIEN

Against the dollars-and-cents boasting of the Calpine LNG terminal proposal, there is an esthetic argument that is also economic. The mouth of the Columbia River and its terrain has a commerce value that is intrinsic with its beauty — and that beauty and that drama should be appointed in selective and not in subtractive ways. To mention, for instance, a Conference Center and an LNG plant in the same breath is truly absurd since no brotherhood of hematologists, astrophysicists or stage magicians is going to convene in Astoria in order to gaze at a landscape of giant petro-udders. Nor will the patrons of hotels, restaurants or mercantile buildings.

Astoria has a proud heritage Clatsop County Port Commissioners should be able to build and capitalize upon without dealing in pure frightfulness. A freighter, a barge or a towboat is by no means unsightly. A pier piling, a gantry or a fish hopper is part of our seaport's natural pageant. On the other hand, an LNG plant is despoiling imagery. It's the Red Desert, West Texas and Alien all rolled into one. It would phase us lightning-fast out of the postcard category of destinations and into an ordinariness that Astorians, from an economic point of view (and from all others), do not need.

~TOM BURGESS

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