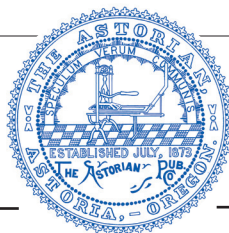


OPINION

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OUR VIEW

Wetland may be best use for Skipanon land

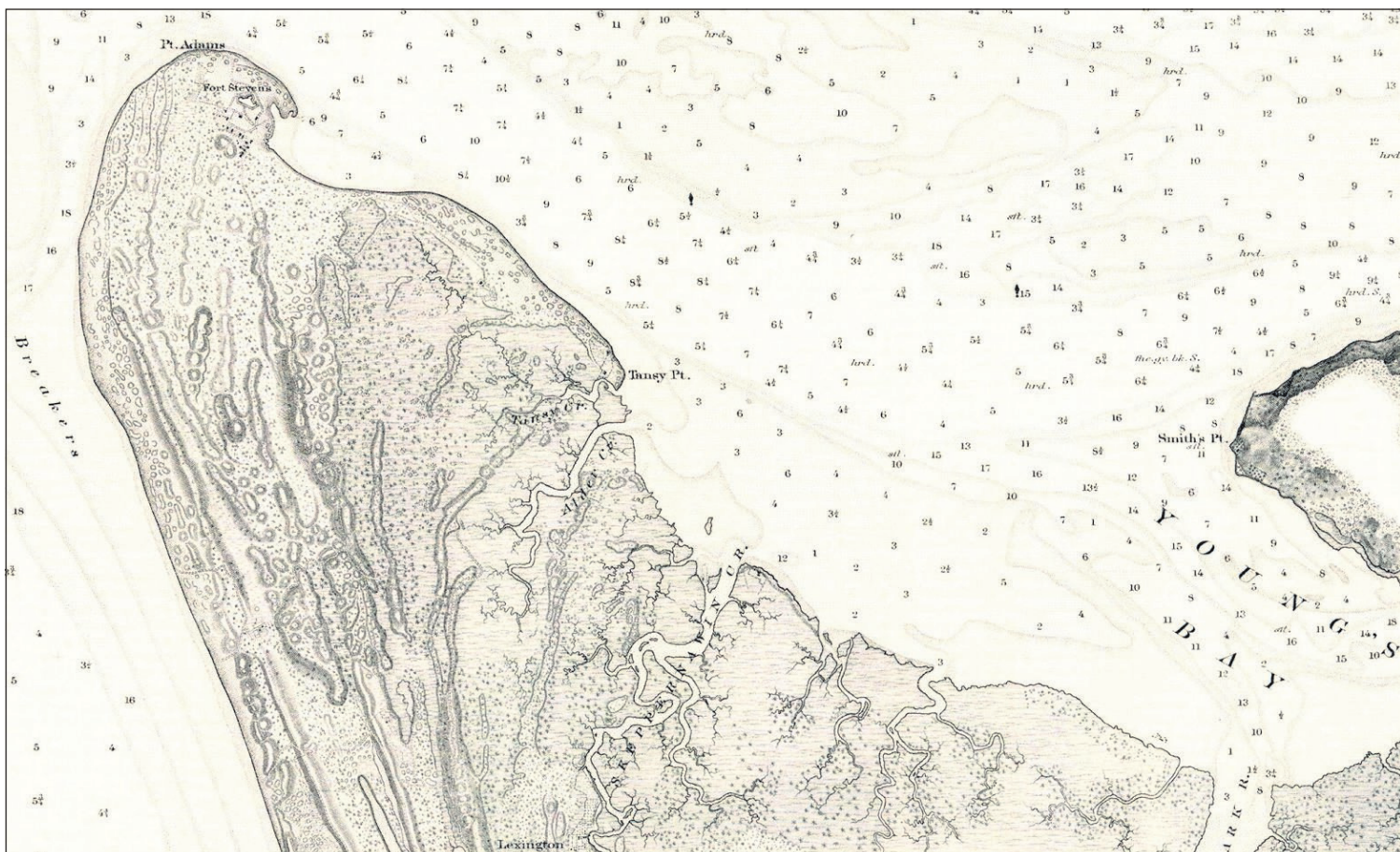
Some key points to consider in deciding what to do with publicly owned land on the Skipanon Peninsula (“Port of Astoria ponders wetland bank,” The Daily Astorian, May 30):

- Around 80 percent of the Columbia River estuary’s tidal wetlands — historically dominated by Sitka spruce and serving an important array of environmental functions including salmon habitat — has been destroyed or damaged by development.
- We live in a time of rising sea levels. Though counteracted here, for the time being, by a swelling subduction zone in the Earth’s crust, much low-lying land near the ocean will be subjected to increasing flooding as this century moves forward.
- Man-made dredge-spoils land is particularly vulnerable to erosion and liquefaction during earthquakes, making it ill-suited for most forms of industrial and residential building.
- Deciding where to best accommodate coastal development will increasingly become a critical issue as the U.S. population increases. Even in the absence of climate change, the Pacific Northwest can eventually expect a population density analogous to that in the Northeast, which had a 200-year head start on intensive settlement.
- Although somewhat remote from local population centers, the public has a surprising degree of interest in the Skipanon Peninsula. It was the focal point of years of heated controversy after a former Port of Astoria commission wanted to lease part of it — which it at the time leased from the state — for a proposed liquefied natural gas terminal that has since been rejected.

The Port owns the portion of the peninsula closest to the historic shoreline, while the state of Oregon owns its northeastern tip. The Port is starting to

decide whether to flood more than 70 acres of dunes and shrublands it owns for use as a wetland mitigation bank. The two entities would be smart to work together on an overall plan for the land.

As our story last week explained, many construction projects affecting watersheds require creation of new wetlands or purchase of credits to offset adverse impacts of development. Banks are large wetland restoration projects approved by the state to sell credits within a certain area. They can be source of considerable revenue for their owners, while facilitating nearby economic development by clearing the way for building on other wetlands. The Port itself recently paid more than \$260,000



U.S. Coast Survey Historical Map & Chart Collection

A detail from an 1870 federal nautical chart shows the complex hydrology of the shoreline and land between Point Adams and the mouth of the Lewis and Clark River. Interlaced with creeks and sloughs, the area was, in large measure, a tidal marsh. The chart indicates that Fort Stevens land access was limited to a narrow track along the top of one of the elevated dunes stretching away to the southeast.

for 1.5 acres worth of wetland mitigation credits from Warrenton Fiber to offset runway work at the Astoria Regional Airport.

Creation of a wetland bank may be the highest and best use for this ephemeral land by the side of a dynamic river mouth. Although there will be those who grouse about loss of near-shore land for hypothetical future industrial development, it doesn’t make sense to build much of anything on a sand bank that didn’t exist a century ago and which may disappear in coming decades. Creating a wetland bank won’t be cheap or easy, but there is good potential for partnerships with entities interested in habitat restoration. Writing

about a project elsewhere in the estuary, Columbia Land Trust correctly observed, “If the Columbia River is the lifeblood of the region, then the lower Columbia River may well be its heart. By restoring tidal wetlands, swamps, sloughs, and channels, we’re increasing resilience in the ecosystem, and we’re putting landscapes in a position to recover some of our most threatened and iconic wildlife species. The work is muddy, slow, and at times daunting, but when the fish arrive in places dormant for centuries, it offers new hope. The pulse quickens and the river stirs, thriving with life.”

This would be an excellent outcome for the Skipanon Peninsula.

Writing

SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

Reimagining a historic Indian village

For sale: Abandoned 1950s wood-framed schoolhouse in tsunami inundation zone. On former site of historic Native American village; centrally located, ocean views. Serious offers only.

So might the ad for the former Cannon Beach Elementary School read when it goes on the market this year.

Former Seaside School District Superintendent Doug Dougherty proposed the school’s closing in 2013, attributed to a \$1.5 million budget shortfall.



R.J. MARX

The location at 15 feet above sea level — less than half the predicted 38-to-40-foot wave height expected in even a small tsunami, and more than a mile to high ground — sealed the school’s fate.

A 2016 citywide survey showed 77 percent favored developing the former elementary school into a community center.

The Cannon Beach Chorus suggested a concert hall. The Haystack Rock Awareness Program expressed interest in an art and ecology center.

Other potential uses? Survey respondents imagined fairs, festivals, swap meets, a kayak launch or a beer garden. While uses are limited by the property’s institutional zoning to a museum, educational or cultural activity, a conditional use permit could allow a parking lot, restroom or dog impound facility.

“Some may say, ‘Why would you want to buy an old gym building?’” Mayor Sam Steidel, a longtime proponent of a city purchase of the property, said in January. “It used to be a very central part of the community. And it’s the entrance to our town. People care about that, and I think there’s been lots of efforts by citizens to say so.”

Heritage site

The city’s 2017 Parks and Trails Master Plan listed NeCus’ Park and school site



Danny Miller/The Daily Astorian

Guy Capoeman, carver of the welcome pole, speaks during a dedication in 2016 at NeCus’ Park in Cannon Beach.

improvements a “high priority” to be accomplished within five years. The park holds “great importance to the community in terms of its locational, historical, cultural and ecological value,” the plan stated.

For no one more than the people who lived here for centuries.

The former school sits on the former site of NeCus’ village, a gathering point for tribes and central location for generations.

The Clatsops occupied “a unique pivot-point on the region’s historical landscape,” author and research professor Doug Deur, a tribal descendant, wrote in the Oregon Historical Quarterly.

The Clatsop and their villages lined the south bank of the Columbia River estuary, the Chinooks and their villages north.

“From those homelands, these tribes dominated social and economic life at the mouth of the river through the early Northwest fur-trade era, as they had for countless generations prior,” Deur wrote.

David Stowe, a representative of the Clatsop-Nehalem Federated Tribes, said there remains a “ton of interest” in the former school.

“The site was one of our most important village sites, and all of us on council and most of us in the tribe had family members

born there, lived there and died there.”

The culture stretches 15,000 to 20,000 years for Indian settlement in North America. “We say ‘time immemorial.’”

Stowe’s great-great-aunt and great-great-uncle were the last two Indian people to live there.

To say that the site has meaning for the tribe is “an understatement,” he said.

Underground radar maps show underground longhouses, pit-houses and a trove of archaeological data remaining.

“One of the important things for us is to not disturb that,” Stowe said. “We hope that the integrity of the site will be maintained and honored.”

While interested in providing input, the tribe will not be among the bidders.

“We had been trying to protect the site for a long time, but the logistics are challenging for a small group and we thought this was really a little more than we could take on,” Stowe said.

What would he like to see at the school location?

“I’d love to see a longhouse, personally.”

What it’s worth

In September 2016, the land at the former school property was valued at

\$450,000.

While most of the classrooms in the 1950s-era building would be unusable, Coaster Construction contractor John Nelson concluded the gym was in good condition. The cost of interior and exterior renovations, including a 25 percent contingency, was estimated at \$371,000.

The city and the school district were unable to come to an agreement during preliminary negotiations, and the project shifted to the backburner.

For the school district, the elementary school remains another piece in a budding North Coast real estate portfolio, along with Seaside High School, Broadway Middle School and Gearhart Elementary School.

In May, Sheila Roley, superintendent of the Seaside School District, said the district had received appraisals for replacement value of the building and property value if there were no building on it.

A third appraisal will offer “what would be a reasonable cost if you sold the building as is,” Roley said.

“We’re happy to talk to the city about any interest in the school,” she added. “We haven’t had any recent conversations, but we would love to have that building as a Cannon Beach community facility.”

Steidel remains committed to a possible acquisition, but said interest from the City Council has waned.

“I’m the proponent, and I can’t seem to get a council majority to be forthcoming or proactive,” Steidel said. “They keep saying it’s going to be too expensive and has too many problems. I don’t think they’re seeing the vision that it could be.”

The mayor will have an ally in the tribal council.

“We’re very much looking forward to participating with the planning and seeing how things develop there,” Stowe said. “I have a feeling there can be a good outcome for everybody there. That would be awesome.”

R.J. Marx is The Daily Astorian’s South County reporter and editor of the Seaside Signal and Cannon Beach Gazette.