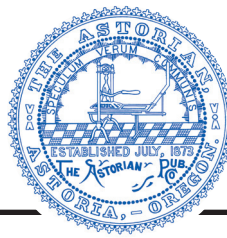


OPINION



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BEHIND THE NEWS

'This isn't some sort of a stepping stone'

The Port of Astoria burned through five executive directors since 2012.

Will Isom wasn't sure he wanted to be the sixth.

As the Port's finance director for the past three years, Isom concentrated on clean audits while the relationship between Jim Knight and the Port Commission disintegrated. He was appointed interim director after Knight resigned in June and earned the permanent job in early December.



DERRICK DePLEDGE

"I think there's a microscope, kind of, on that job," he said. "It's very public."

Aware of the turnover and the Port Commission's reputation for volatility, Isom is negotiating for a longer-term contract with incentives for positive performance reviews.

Before the Port, Isom had stints in finance at Columbia Memorial Hospital in Astoria and the Georgia-Pacific Wauna Mill. He also coached basketball at Knappa High School, his alma mater.

Isom talked about the challenges at the Port — and how the agency could rebuild public trust — in an interview.

Q: What do you see as the biggest challenge facing the Port?

A: Ultimately the job of the Port is to manage certain public assets in a way that creates economic growth and jobs.

I think over a long period of time now the revenue that the Port generates has been inadequate to properly maintain and reinvest into those assets. You can see the symptoms of this everywhere. We have low cash reserves. We have high debt loads. We have crumbling infrastructure.

So I think the real challenge going forward is to figure out how to fix this financial shortfall. And I don't think it's just one answer. I think there's a number of things. We have to be able to improve our operating margin on an annual basis, and so we need to find a way, not only to cut costs, but to increase those operating revenues.

We also need to be looking for outside sources, through help from the state, through grant programs. And so I think there's a whole spectrum of avenues that we could possibly use to address these issues.

But I think a lot of what has troubled the Port really comes down to money. And so that's something we have to solve.

Q: We've had several executive directors over the past decade. Why the turnover, you think?



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Will Isom is the new executive director of the Port of Astoria.

'I THINK AS LONG AS WE'RE TRANSPARENT, WE'RE INFORMED AND WE MAINTAIN WORKING RELATIONSHIPS DESPITE MAYBE NOT AGREEING ON EVERY ISSUE, THEN I THINK THE PORT'S DOING ITS JOB.'

A: I do want to be careful in sort of speaking for past directors or those commissions. Each situation could have had a unique set of circumstances and I may not know all of those details.

I do think that, as a general statement for such a small port, the Port of Astoria has a wide range of stakeholders. Many of those stakeholders rely either completely, or at least partially, on the Port for their livelihood.

So because of this I think there is sort of added scrutiny on any decision the Port makes. I think this makes it vital for the Port director to be really open and transparent and make sure that the decisions that get made are fully contemplated.

Q: You're a Knappa guy. What is the value of having someone with local ties in a leadership role at the Port?

A: I don't think having local ties should, obviously, be the most important factor in hiring a director.

I do think, however, that it could be in the best interest of the public to have some long-term stability with this position moving forward. I would say there's probably some correlation between having local ties and the likelihood that I

would be in this role for a longer period of time.

Like I said, my wife and I are both local, plan to be in the area for a long time. So, for me, this isn't some sort of a stepping stone type job to a bigger port or something like that.

Q: In an interview after your appointment with the Columbia Press, you said the Port has at times sacrificed long-term health for short-term gain. What's an example of that?

A: Conceptually, the Port ultimately is run by an elected board. And, as such, that can change every two years, through each special election.

I do think there is some pressure — and rightfully so — as a commission and thereby on the Port manager to really look at that short-term time horizon and make sure that we're having some short-term successes.

Over a long period of time, I think the biggest sort of evidence of some of that decision-making does have to do with the deferred maintenance issues that we're facing. Because deferred maintenance tends to be something that — it's not something sexy, you're not

going to get a lot of applause for investing money into things that maybe should have been fixed a long time ago.

Another good example has to do with our AOC4 (Area of Concern 4) contamination issue down on the central waterfront. This is one that has drug on now for close to 20 years, but in order to really close the loop on this and get a resolution, it will ultimately cost the Port some money. And it's a project that isn't going to bring in more revenue for the Port. It's not going to be something that people can really see and then go, "Oh, there's where that money went."

Those are just some examples of things that have been sort of lingering out there, but because, in the short term, there may not be as much benefit, maybe those things have been pushed off. Or the priority hasn't been to really invest into those type of things.

Q: The new strategic plan talks about repairing public trust. How do you do that?

A: My job as the Port director is to manage the Port in a way that serves the best long-term interest of the public.

I realize that not every decision the Port makes everyone is going to love, and I think that's OK. I think as long as we're transparent, we're informed and we maintain working relationships despite maybe not agreeing on every issue, then I think the Port's doing its job.

And I guess my hope going forward is that increased public trust would be a byproduct to that management style.

Q: How are you going to define success? How do we know that it's working?

A: I don't really have some big profound statement, I guess, about what it means to be successful.

I do think it's important for any organization, or even individual, to have goals. It's important as you accomplish things to keep setting the bar higher and creating new goals.

I guess, from that standpoint, I personally have never really felt like I was a success. I don't really think of it in those terms.

In some ways — I don't know if this is the right answer — but I think almost being afraid to fail is what motivates me more than striving for some kind of abstract definition of success.

I know in sports they often say that the agony of defeat is greater than the thrill of victory, and I think there's some truth to that. I would say that my motivation is really that fear of failure, and kind of running from that.

Derrick DePledge is the editor of The Astorian.

GUEST COLUMN

Timber lawsuit verdict a reality check

It took a Linn County jury only a few hours to determine what timber communities have long known — state forests are being mismanaged.

When the state took over management of 15 counties' lands in 1941, the parties intended that the lands be managed to return timber revenue to the counties. But for the past two decades, the state chose instead to manage these lands for other objectives. In doing so, it broke a long-standing contract with the counties.



STEVE ZIKA

Fourteen of these counties subsequently sued, leading to last month's jury decision awarding counties \$1.1 billion in damages.

So, what does this decision mean for Oregonians? First, let's be clear what it doesn't mean. This decision does not threaten any of the values these working forests currently provide. While this land — representing 4% of forestland in the state — should be managed for timber, it can do so while also providing environmental benefits.

Forests, including working forests, are home to some of the best water quality in the state and unlike other crops, as timber grows, it provides habitat for a variety of wildlife. Land doesn't have to be "wild" to support wildlife. Ask any of the hikers, hunters, fishers or foragers who regularly use our timberlands to recreate and they will tell you the same.

Even with timber as a priority on these lands, the Oregon Department of Forestry must still comply with all state and federal laws that protect water quality, human health and threatened and endangered species. Compliance with these laws is non-negotiable and does not change with this



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Hampton Lumber CEO Steve Zika helped purchase the Warrenton mill in 2009 and has worked to fix and update the plant to increase production.

decision.

Rather, the court determined that the state broke a contractual agreement when it decided to go above and beyond these legal requirements in order to prioritize other stakeholder interests and other values without the consent of the counties and the taxing districts.

Admittedly, the forestry department has been in a difficult position. Over the years, I have known state forest managers to be dedicated public servants who struggle to navigate politics and increasing expectations that add to and sometimes confuse their mission. It's not easy work and is too often underrecognized, underappreciated and understaffed. This ruling should clar-

ify and focus the forestry department's responsibilities, at least on state lands.

This outcome is both validating and frustrating for local sawmills that purchase timber from these forests. Our company supports the counties as we too live with the realities of reduced timber supply and revenue.

Many know these lands can protect water quality and sensitive habitat all while producing timber that pays for forest upkeep and county services. It was the state's obligation to manage them in that way. It's disappointing that taxpayers could be asked to foot the bill for services that sustainable timber production could have and should have supported.

But perhaps the true costs of such policy decisions need to be better understood and experienced by all Oregonians. To date, the cost of shifting priorities away from the counties and toward a vague concept of "balance" — a thing increasingly determined more by agenda and ideology than ecological or economic science — has been borne entirely by the surrounding rural communities in terms of not only reduced revenue and jobs but also quality of life.

Schools, roads, public safety, health services, small businesses and infrastructure have all suffered due to reduced timber harvests. What the counties argued — and the jury agreed — is that if the state wants to manage these lands for other stakeholders, those stakeholders need to help shoulder the associated costs of those decisions.

This verdict should be a reality check not only for the state forestry department, but for all Oregonians. The state can and should do better by forest-dependent counties. But this is also an opportunity to recognize and rethink what working forests everywhere are capable of.

While comprising only a small portion of Oregon's total forestland, the state forests and the wood products they create now and in the future have the potential to help us achieve more sustainable and vibrant rural communities and a greener built environment in our urban areas.

While this decision will undoubtedly be appealed and debated in the courts to come, I'm hopeful it will promote a respectful recognition of the rights of forest-dependent counties and all the values and benefits well-managed working forests are capable of providing.

Steve Zika is chief executive of Hampton Lumber.