

## Port: New director irons out finance mess

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important as an executive director. You have to be able to see things at a higher level.”

Isom's roots in Clatsop County are deep. He grew up in Knappa and he and his wife both graduated from Knappa High School. They have young children and, initially, Isom had no desire to step into a position fraught with scandal and negative headlines.

The Port of Astoria was founded in 1914 to boost trade, but the past two decades have been anything but smooth sailing.

Two decades ago, Peter Gearin was hired as executive director. He was fired eight

years later under a cloud and eventually pleaded guilty in federal court to violating the federal Clean Water Act over mishandling contaminated dredge spoils.

Gearin was replaced by Jack Crider, who resigned a year later, then Herb Florer, who served as interim director. Next was Hank Bynaker, who resigned after a year, and Mike Weston, who was appointed interim director and replaced by Knight.

When Knight left earlier this year, many of the port's contracts were a mess and the port had been sued by a hotelier.

Isom was hired as a staff accountant in January 2015,

after most of the previous administration had gone. When a consultant who'd been hired to straighten out port finances left, Isom was appointed finance director.

The port commission didn't want to make any mistakes in the appointment of their new executive director, Chairman Dirk Rohne said. They asked Special Districts Association of Oregon, a state agency, to conduct an evaluation of Isom's performance. Surveys were sent to more than 40 port tenants, employees and other stakeholders, such as Business Oregon, another state agency that oversees grants.

“The results came back

very positive,” the association's George Dunkel said. He reviewed specifics of the results with commissioners and Isom in a closed-door session.

“I thought it was important for the public to know he received a thorough evaluation after five months on the job,” Rohne said in open session. “State stakeholders ... have been very pleased with the Port of Astoria under Will Isom's direction and we may have a very good future working with them.”

Isom has turned in perfect audits the past two years, Commissioner James Campbell said. “He has worked hard to straighten out the mess we were in five

years ago.”

Commissioner Robert Stevens made the motion to appoint Isom; Stevens and Rohne will work with special districts in negotiating a contract with the new executive director.

Stepping into the role is a bit awesome and concerning, Isom said.

“There has been a high degree of turnover, often associated with some negative media coverage,” Isom said. “Because of the public nature of this job, there's kind of a magnifying glass on it.”

Because Isom is in the middle of his career and not the end, as most executive directors have been, he wants a contract that looks at his role long term, instead of pushing for a high-end salary.

His financial expertise will come in handy, commissioners are convinced.

“Sometimes the long-term health of the port was sacrificed for short-term gain,” Isom said. “In order to survive and to thrive, you really have to make decisions on a longer horizon.”

In the past five months, he negotiated a contract with the Longshoremen, tying pay increases to the port's financial health.

He completed the strategic plan, required by the state for grant eligibility, he rehired Operations Director Matt McGrath, who'd resigned his position over frustrations with Knight.

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