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Tide of opposition forms to Port of Corpus Christi's desalination plans

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(Photo: Tim Acosta/Caller-Times)

The Port of Corpus Christi's application for a permit for a seawater desalination plant on Harbor Island is causing growing concern in nearby Port Aransas.

That much was evident at Thursday's meeting of the Port Aransas City Council. Residents spoke out strongly against the project and what it could mean for wildlife and marine life in the bay that is the backbone of the tourism industry on which Port Aransas heavily relies.

"This is a fishing town," said Port Aransas resident Cathy Fulton. "We can't ignore what would happen to ... the fish in this town. If this town's fishing industry dies, this town dies, and that is the truth. We cannot ignore this."

Port officials have been looking over the past few months at the possibility of seeking permits for two seawater desalination plants at Harbor Island in Port Aransas and the La Quinta junction in San Patricio County. Each would be capable of producing at least 20 million gallons of potable water per day. The idea is to ensure an uninterrupted source of water for residents and industry stakeholders in the event of a drought.

More: [Corpus Christi to study whether desalination plant is a pipe dream or reality \(/story/news/local/2018/05/24/corpus-christi-study-whether-desalination-pipe-dream-reality/635261002/\)](#)

More: [TCEQ: Port of Corpus Christi seeking permit for desalination plant \(/story/news/local/2018/05/14/tceq-port-corpus-christi-looking-construct-desalination-plant-texas/607694002/\)](#)

Port leaders have been adamant that the port has no intention of building or operating a desalination facility itself, but is trying to get the lengthy permitting process out of the way in the event the city of Corpus Christi, county or some other third party opts to construct one itself.

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"What we're going to do is permit one, and if (for example) the city of Corpus Christi decides that they're going to need that alternate source of water, or they contract with a third-party to build a desalination plant, we're going to assign that permit to them," said Charlie Zahn, chairman of the Port of Corpus Christi Authority commission.

The TCEQ would be then be responsible for ensuring that whoever the permit is assigned to complies with the requirements it outlines. But Zahn said that because the permit application is still in the very early stages of review, much of the information is still being finalized before it moves on to the technical process.

"I want you to know that I believe that what's taking place here today is a little bit premature," he said, referring to Tuesday's council meeting agenda item on the permit application. "I think this process is going to take ... about 300 days to get to the point where the draft permit goes through the hearing process and we can determine exactly what the technical requirements are."

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Sean Strawbridge, CEO for the Port of Corpus Christi, addresses members of the Port Aransas City Council on July 19, 2018. (Photo: Tim Acosta/Caller-Times)

Residents who are part of the newly formed group, Port Aransas Conservancy, voiced their concerns about the desalination plant. The group has also voiced opposition to plans that the port has to deepen part of the Corpus Christi Ship Channel all the way up to the La Quinta Channel to 75 feet in order to fully load Very Large Crude Carriers capable of carrying 2 million barrels of crude oil.

The group questioned the need for the facility, especially since there is no current industrial presence on Harbor Island. Like Fulton, who is a member of the group, council members also expressed concern about the impact the intake and outfall sites could have on the salinity of the bay.

More: [Port of Corpus Christi to look at whether Harbor Island plans are feasible \(/story/news/local/2018/05/15/port-corpus-christi-delving-into-feasibility-harbor-island-plans/611049002/\)](/story/news/local/2018/05/15/port-corpus-christi-delving-into-feasibility-harbor-island-plans/611049002/)

More: [Opposition group forms to Port of Corpus Christi's Harbor Island plans \(/story/news/local/2018/06/21/opposition-group-forms-port-corpus-christis-harbor-island-plans/723177002/\)](/story/news/local/2018/06/21/opposition-group-forms-port-corpus-christis-harbor-island-plans/723177002/)

"Why do we want a desalination plant that would produce 20 million gallons a day over on Harbor Island where there's no industry?" Fulton asked. "Why would you want that when the industry's up the channel? And you need to please think about that very carefully — there is an ulterior motive that the port is not disclosing, and hasn't been disclosing everything, and is trying their best to hide it."

Sean Strawbridge, CEO of the Port of Corpus Christi, reiterated Zahn's statement that the port is trying to be a good partner to help the area and local industry better prepare for a drought. The last one occurred just a few years ago, and it heavily impacted areas all around the state.

"I don't think people in this community understand the seriousness of the issue of water in the Coastal Bend," Strawbridge said. "We have a tremendous shortfall of water, and as we see more industry coming in, those demands for water are just going to increase."

"These are new concepts, these are new ideas, and for some people, that's uncomfortable," he added. "We're certainly going to do our part to make sure that we can get as much information supported by science — not anecdotal generalizations, but by science — that people can really then hopefully formulate an opinion."

Port Aransas Mayor Charles Bujan shared similar frustration with the fact that many residents were unaware of the port's desalination permit request until a public notice was sent by the TCEQ on July 11. Discussions had been held by port leaders on the issue since the fall, and their application was submitted in March, officials said



Port Aransas Mayor Charles Bujan listens to Port of Corpus Christi CEO Sean Strawbridge address the City Council on July 19, 2018. Strawbridge and other port staff were in attendance to address concerns about a pending permit application the port has with the TCEQ for a seawater desalination plant on Harbor Island. (Photo: Tim Acosta/Callier-Times)

"Had you given us a heads up way back, it would have been a lot better for us, than to have this (notice) dumped on my desk on July 11," Bujan said.

"Duly noted, and you're absolutely right," Strawbridge replied. "That was certainly an oversight and I'll take responsibility, as the head of the port, for that and we'll make sure that doesn't happen again."

Strawbridge also added that the port is "not immune from making changes to the project," but clarified that would occur "if it makes sense." He said that the port would also make it a priority to ensure that the project is environmentally conscious.

"I share that concern with your constituents, but we're going to let science tell us the story," he said.

The initial permit application phase has a 30-day public comment period that starts July 25, after which the process would move into a technical phase. That latter process can take several months to complete, and would kick off another public comment period. The technical phase would also be when the port would provide more specific data on the proposed facility, as well as intake and outfall locations.

Following that process, the TCEQ could issue a draft permit, which would begin another public comment period and allow residents to request contested case hearings. Overall, getting a final permit for the desalination plant could take anywhere from one to two years, officials have said.

For residents like Tammy King, Strawbridge's comments on Tuesday did little to reassure her about the project, particularly since there were still so many unknowns about it.

"We have to be smarter and not just take their spin (public relations) firm lines that they're 'environmentally sound,' they're 'thinking of the future of Port (Aransas).' That just sounds like a load of bull (expletive)," she said to the council members.

Port Aransas resident Jim Wheeler, who spent the majority of the meeting sitting in silence and listening to the nearly 90-minute discussion, put it a different way. He and his wife are living in Flour Bluff while recovering from Hurricane Harvey and are hoping to come back home to Port Aransas in the coming weeks.

He reflected on how a few years ago his wife had developed a pre-cancerous condition, the same type of cancer that led to her mother's death. But she got treatment and is cancer-free. He compared that situation to the port's plan, and urged city leaders and residents to begin their efforts to oppose the desalination project sooner rather than later.

"She is clear of cancer — it was stopped early," he said of his wife. "It did not have a chance to develop. We need that type of action with this."

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