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Texas



Breaking News:

Full interview with Port of Corpus Christi Commission Chairman Charlie Zahn

Council hears desalination plant proposal

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Dan Parker
News editor



Appearing before the city council, Port Aransas resident Cathy Fulton speaks against the Port of Corpus Christi Authority's efforts to clear the way for discharge of brine into the Corpus Christi Ship Channel from a desalination plant proposed for Harbor Island. Staff photo by Dan Parker

The biggest environmental threat posed by a desalination plant proposed for construction on Harbor Island is that seawater intake lines could harm the ecologically important larval sea life population that abounds in Port Aransas waters, a retired fisheries biologist said.

The biologist, longtime Port Aransas resident Scott Holt, made the remarks during a meeting of the Port Aransas City Council on Thursday, July 19.

A "desal" plant could suck in hundreds of thousands of larval fish each day, he said.

"This is, I think, a serious potential problem with the intake," Holt said.

The Port of Corpus Christi Authority is applying to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) for a Texas Pollution Discharge Elimination System permit to discharge brine associated with a desalination plant proposed for Harbor Island.

The port wouldn't be the entity actually building or operating the plant, said Charlie Zahn, chairman of the port commissioners. The port wants to obtain the discharge permit so the City of Corpus Christi or a third-party can build or operate it, he said. The idea is to help the city supply port industries with water for industrial needs.



Sean Strawbridge, CEO of the Port Authority of Corpus Christi, addresses the Port Aransas City Council on Thursday, July 19. Staff photo by Dan Parker

The port is seeking a permit that would allow an average daily flow of up to 95,600,000 gallons per day, according to a TCEQ notice of receipt of application and intent to obtain water quality permit.

The application is for a facility that would produce 50 million gallons per day at full build-out, said Rosie Collin, director of community relations with the port.

As envisioned by port officials, the desal plant could be built on a piece of port-owned Harbor Island land that lies between the ferry landings and the Martin Midstream terminal that lies at the confluence of the Corpus Christi Ship Channel and Lydia Ann Channel.

No proposal has been made as to precisely where in the ship channel an outfall or intake would be located, port officials said.



Dan Pecore, speaking on behalf of Port Aransas Conservancy, said that bottom-dwelling creatures, along with fish and shrimp, will die or migrate away from the area if a desal plant begins operating as proposed.

“Even assuming that tidal action could dissipate much of the excess salinity, the effect on Port Aransas’ thriving fishing industry could still be catastrophic,” Pecore told the council.

He urged that Port Aransas residents and others register their objections with their elected representatives and the TCEQ.

Port officials defending the idea of a desal plant also spoke. They included Zahn, who is a longtime Port Aransas resident; Sean Strawbridge, CEO of the port; and Sarah Garza, director of environmental planning and compliance. Collin also was present.

“ We would not put something here if we thought it would affect, in a negative way, the ecology,” Strawbridge said.

Council members discussed the matter but took no action, saying they need more information on the technical details of the proposal before they form opinions. Zahn said the port will bring those kinds of details to the council once they’re formulated.

On Friday, the day after the council meeting, Mayor Charles Bujan put in an official request with the TCEQ that the agency hold a public meeting on the port’s application, he said. The purpose would be “to provide the opportunity to submit comments or to ask questions about the application,” Bujan wrote in an email to the South Jetty.

There was no immediate word when or where a meeting might be held.

Council member Beverly Bolner told port officials at the council meeting that quite a few people in Port Aransas are unhappy with the port these days.

The port, she said, put the city “over a barrel” a few months ago with a new city harbor lease contract. It included a provision in which the city had to agree not to change zoning rules in ways that would further inhibit the port from developing Harbor Island. (See June 28 South Jetty, Page 1A.)

The port also is making plans for construction of a ship terminal for Very Large Crude Carrier tanker ships on Harbor Island, which has some worried about the possibility of environmental spoilage and other potential problems.

Bolner said she’s been besieged by calls and emails from upset constituents.



PORT ARANSAS.

Strawbridge said the port is planning a series of town hall meetings for Port Aransans in order to build a “rapport” and “relationships” with people here. No dates or locations for such meetings were mentioned at the council meeting.

Bolner said some people are saying they will put their condominiums up for sale because they’re afraid of the industrialization they think the port might bring to Port Aransas.

As for the aesthetics of a desalination plant, Strawbridge said Harbor Island won’t end up looking like the Port of Corpus Christi authority’s inner harbor, which is lined by refineries.

Desal plants often are covered and can end up looking more like a warehouse than anything else, he said.

Then there is the subject of brine discharges. Brine essentially is extremely salty water. Various sea life is sensitive to just how salty saltwater is, so the brine issue has some folks worried about the effects the discharge might have on wildlife.

Councilman Bruce Clark said objections to the desal plant proposal would largely go away if the desal plant would discharge its brine into a pipeline that would discharge a good distance out into the Gulf of Mexico. That would put the brine in an area that’s not so close to bays and estuaries that provide critical habitat for larval fish, shrimp and crabs.

Strawbridge responded that modeling that the port submitted to the TCEQ with its permit application has shown that, even if discharged in the channel, the brine would be dispersed so well that salinity levels would be within “acceptable” limits.

Garza said the brine wouldn’t be discharged at one location, but would be spread out with something called a “diffuser.”

She followed up by saying that the port has been communicating with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and the Coastal Bend Bays and Estuaries Program to get their input on the desal proposal.

Council member Joan Holt said the discharges may not be the biggest thing to worry about. Water intake from the channel would be a great concern, she said.

Joan Holt is a marine biologist who studied larval fish for years. Scott Holt is her husband.



Having an intake in the right location and in the right condition is “going to be really, really important,” she said.

Garza said intakes aren’t involved in the application that currently is being considered by the TCEQ. No decision has been made yet on where intakes would be, she said.

Garza added that “advanced” technology exists for dealing with the intake matter.

“We are doing everything we can, based on science,” she said.

Asked by Holt whether the operator of the plant will be required to ensure the intake operates in an environmentally friendly manner, Garza said the TCEQ would require the operator abide by the conditions of permitting.

Zahn said that would also be a condition of any lease the port has with any entity that runs a desal plant on port property.

Scott Holt said the brine actually might disperse well in the Corpus Christi Ship Channel because there is such a large amount of water exchange constantly happening in the channel due to tidal action.

He agreed with Joan Holt that a plant’s water intake would be the biggest thing to worry about.

The water in that area is always “full of larvae,” he said.

Strawbridge said the port will proceed with the desal idea in a “methodical” way, with “good science.”

Joan Holt said Port Aransas and the port are involved with different industries that naturally can put them at odds with each other.

“I think our problem is that we’re (involved in) different money-based things,” she told the port officials. “All your money is going to Corpus, trying to bring industry, more industry there. Ours is all tourism, and we’re trying to keep it beautiful and clean and gorgeous, because we’re completely based on tourism.”

Strawbridge said the port has a good environmental record, receiving the 2018 Texas Environmental Excellence Award in Pollution Preventing, presented by the TCEQ.

Port industries have said their top concern is making sure they have a steady, reliable source of water. That’s not always easy, because the City of Corpus Christi’s water supply



its drinking water from the City of Corpus

Christi, either directly or indirectly.

Strawbridge said that part of the money generated by economic stimulus like development on Harbor Island “will go right back into this community.”

He said the port has committed to rebuilding the Port Street pier (popularly known as the Charlie’s Pasture Pier) that was destroyed by Hurricane Harvey.

The port also is doing a hydrological study on the ship wakes that damaged the pier in the past and blasted seawater over the bulkhead along port street, Strawbridge said. The port is doing that even though law puts the responsibility for negative impacts of a passing vessel on the vessel owner, not the port, he said.

“But we’re here as a member of this community to do what we can do to give back to this community,” Strawbridge said. “We are not going to do things that negatively affect the quality of life here.”

Audience members weren’t prepared to take port officials’ word for that. One of those audience members was Tammy King, who owns a Port Aransas home that’s just across the channel from Harbor Island.

King pointed out that Port Aransas in the 1970s beat back a port proposal called Deeport, which would have further industrialized Harbor Island.

“We have to be smart and not just take their spin and PR firm lines that they’re environmentally sound,” King told the council.

Bujan told the port officials they should have started communicating with Port Aransas about the desalination proposal months ago.

“Had you given us a heads up, way back, it would have been a lot better than for us to have this dumped on my desk on July 11,” the mayor said, referring to a TCEQ notice he received.

Strawbridge apologized.

“Duly noted,” he said. “You’re absolutely right. That was certainly an oversight, and I’ll take responsibility, as the head of the port, for that, and we’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again.”



(Editor's note: South Jetty readers also can expect continued news stories about the port's proposals, as issues develop.)

Public comments may be submitted electronically at www.tceq.texas.gov/about/comments. Comments may be mailed to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, Office of the Chief Clerk, MC-105, PO Box 13807, Austin, TX, 78711-3087.

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