

Opposition group forms to Port of Corpus Christi's Harbor Island plans

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(Photo: File photo)

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The Port of Corpus Christi's grand plans for Harbor Island are being met with opposition by a newly formed group in Port Aransas.

A website attributed to an organization calling itself Port Aransas Conservancy has surfaced to argue against a proposal announced by the Port of Corpus Christi in April. The port is conducting a feasibility study for a project that would dredge a portion of the Corpus Christi Ship Channel — from the channel entrance all the way to the La Quinta Junction near Ingleside — near Harbor Island down to 75 feet.

The idea is to fully load Very Large Crude Carriers — capable of transporting up to 2 million barrels of crude oil — out of the ship channel. Port officials have said the project is being looked at to help meet the coming influx of crude from the Permian Basin by way of billions of dollars in new pipelines under construction.

"Harbor Island would become a staging area for two Very Large Crude Carriers (VLCCs), each of which is 200 feet longer than the carrier Lexington," according to the group's website. "Plus Harbor Island would host a 20 million barrel tank farm directly in the path of hurricane storm surges. What could possibly go wrong?"

The Port Aransas Conservancy website was created June 16, according to online records. The group describes itself as a "group of long-time Port Aransas residents, home owners, and others concerned about managing Port A's growth in a manner that retains the charm that brought us here in the first place, as well as millions of winter and summer Texans."

The portion of Harbor Island that would serve as the possible site for the proposed VLCC marine loading facility is in the city of Port Aransas, but is owned by the port.

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Port commissioners last month approved a \$5.2 million contract to a Los Angeles-based company to conduct feasibility and environmental studies related to the Harbor Island terminal facility. The purpose of the study is to determine whether the project is actually viable, and is expected to be completed sometime next year.

The port is in the midst of a \$327 million expansion of the Corpus Christi Ship Channel, which would widen the channel and deepen it to 54 feet. That would allow for the full loading of Suezmax vessels, capable of transporting 1 million barrels of crude oil. At the moment, fully loading such large vessels in the ship channel requires them to be partially filled. The rest of the load is ferried out to the vessel in the Gulf of Mexico.



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The Port of Corpus Christi Commission wants to eventually widen and deepen the Corpus Christi Ship Channel enough to accommodate large cargo tankers like the Anne, which docked in Ingleside on a trial run May 26, 2017. (Photo: Courtney Sacco/Caller-Times)

Port officials have said that the Harbor Island work could theoretically be done alongside the ship channel expansion, since dredgers will already be in the water, though it would be a completely separate project in need of its own funding.

More: [Port of Corpus Christi approves \\$217M in bonds for ship channel, capital needs](#)

Sean Strawbridge, CEO of the Port of Corpus Christi, on Thursday said he was unfamiliar with Port Aransas Conservancy, but reiterated the port's willingness to work with residents about any concerns they have about the Harbor Island project.

"We are not yet familiar with this newly created organization, nor have we had any requests to meet with them as of yet," Strawbridge said. "As always, we welcome any opportunity to meet with members of the local community and share in ideas and information on our development plans."

"We certainly will not undertake any project development without consideration of our environmental precepts, which are a commitment to air quality, water quality, soils and

sediments quality, habitat preservation and restoration, and environmental stewardship," he added.

Harbor Island has seen industrial use in the past, and was formerly a terminal site for Exxon decades ago. But those assets were later removed and the site cleaned up. The port came into possession of the 250 acres of land in 1996, as part of a land swap with Flint Hills Resources.

Martin Midstream proposed a condensate splitter facility on Harbor Island several years ago, but residents in Port Aransas voiced opposition to the project and a lawsuit was later filed challenging the bidding process for the sale of the land. The project and purchase were later cancelled, though Port Aransas officials later modified the property's zoning to disallow manufacturing or refining.

It did allow for acceptable uses, one of which is as a storage terminal.

The port's Harbor Island project would not involve any refining, but would act as a storage terminal for crude oil to be loaded onto VLCCs. That oil would be supplied to the storage tanks via pipeline, officials have said.

The port also renewed a lease with the city of Port Aransas that allows the city to continue using more than 30 acres of property that make up the municipal marina and boat harbor. It encompasses the waterway that provides access to the harbor, as well as various boat docks.

Within that lease renewal was a new clause that allows the port to terminate its lease with the city for the marina property if Port Aransas officials want to modify or change the current heavy industrial use zoning, as occurred in 2014. That would mean the port could take back the property in question if the city violates that term of the lease.