

Group opposes port terminal idea

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Zach Perkins
Reporter



A ship, the GasChem Hamburg, a 569-foot Liberianflagged tanker, steams through the Corpus Christi Ship Channel off Roberts Point Park on Saturday, June 9, as two anglers fish from the breakwater at the park. This ship was just passing through, but the Port of Corpus Christi is proposing to build a port terminal where tanker ships could dock and load up on crude oil on a part of Harbor Island that lies just behind the ship in this photo. Staff photo by Ron Farmer

A new Port Aransas group has formed to oppose the Port of Corpus Christi's major plans for Harbor Island.

The group, Port Aransas Conservancy, was established earlier this month in reaction to the port's plans to build a tank farm and oil-export terminal on Harbor Island. (See story in the April 18 issue of the South Jetty.) The newly formed organization has a couple of dozen members, said John Donovan of Pflugerville, a spokesman for the group, who owns a second home in Port Aransas.

Donovan, who created the Port Aransas Conservancy website, is a retired tech writer, publisher, website builder and businessman.

Port of Corpus Christi plans are to build a staging area for Very Large Crude Carriers (VLCC), along with widening and deepening the Corpus Christi Ship Channel, plus the building of a tank farm.

“A crude oil export terminal. ...And having ships turn around right there, that really got us going,” Donovan said.

The opposition organization is spearheaded mostly by locals and second homeowners who began conversing on various Port Aransas Facebook pages, he said. While Port Aransas Conservancy still is in its early stages, Donovan said he plans to eventually make the group a non-profit organization. Right now, it’s considered an LLC, until he can file for a 501(c)(4). Non-profit 501(c)(4) groups must exclusively promote social welfare, according to the Internal Revenue Service.



An aerial view shows the land on Harbor Island where the Port Authority of Corpus Christi wants to build a shipping terminal for very large crude oil carriers – tanker ships. The ferry landings can be seen at far left.
South Jetty file photo

While members of Port Aransas Conservancy have not filed suit against the port, they do plan to make objections to the port authority with letters and

petitions, to start, Donovan said. The group also will be present at future city council and port commissioners' meetings.

The Port Aransas Conservancy website, www.portaransasconservancy.com, states that their goal is "to foster a balance of conservation and economically sustainable uses for Port Aransas and its surrounding neighborhood and waterways, while recognizing that our community and economy is dependent on tourism and fisheries within a healthy barrier island coastal ecosystem."

The biggest environmental concern for Donovan is a large turning basin that would need to be built for VLCC tankers near the Lydia Ann Channel.

"We are concerned about the environmental impacts," Donovan said. "These behemoth ships (VLCC) require a 1,500-foot turning basin, which would require a huge amount of dredging."

He also expressed concerns about where the spoil from the dredging would be placed.

Donovan said dredging in this area could possibly damage fisheries adjacent to Roberts Point Park.

Though Donovan said he had no issues with the port shipping oil back-and-forth through the Corpus Christi Ship Channel, he does have an issue with the crude oil export terminal being located directly across from the park.

"Oil is going to be transported and exported all the time through the channel, and that's fine," he said. "But who wants to go vacation where there's a giant container terminal?"

In April, port officials said the facility would be "low profile" and "environmentally sustainable."

Messages left with port staff over the past few weeks haven't been returned.

Donovan also said the placement of a VLCC would be dangerous if another hurricane were to hit Port Aransas.

The timeline of this project is a question mark for Donovan as well.

"The port is racing to start the permit process with a very aggressive timeline for this project," he said. "...Any idea of public input is a joke."

While port officials have not formally presented city officials plans for Harbor Island, the port and city recently signed a 30-year lease agreement for the city marina, which is owned by the Port of Corpus Christi. In the lease, it states that if city officials attempt to limit the port's ability to develop Harbor Island beyond what's in current law, the lease would be terminated.

"I'm not sure what the city could have done to prevent this. It remains to be seen what they can do, but I really think the city needs to oppose the port," Donovan said. "I really want to push to have this facility in Ingleside. Forget Harbor Island."

Donovan said the Occidental Petroleum Corporation (OXY) facility in Ingleside already is equipped with a turning basin.

"They could do this in Ingleside with very little environmental impact," Donovan said. "That's just a little farther down. They already have everything in place right there."

But the Port of Corpus Christi doesn't own that land.

"Since Oxy has the facility, they would get most of the money, not the port. The port wants the money," Donovan said.

On its website, Port Aransas Conservancy lists 14 reasons to oppose the Harbor Island project:

- Potentially toxic dredge material produced.
- Impacts of dredge material placement.
- Locating large oil storage tanks in a storm surge-prone area.
- Increased erosion damage caused by larger tanker wakes.
- Interruption of ferry service by proximity of a tanker turning basin.
- Greater risk of a large spill or toxic pollution.
- Increased storm surge levels and intensity from a deeper channel.
- Seagrass damage caused by sediment suspension and light attenuation.
- Negative impacts upon the tourism economic sector.

- Spill risks from pipelines in bay waters.
- Increased chronic health issues related to oil and gas industry facilities.
- Issues related to the creation of a security zone near the ferry landing and the exclusion of recreational boating.
- Negative impacts upon Port Aransas property values.
- Negative impacts upon the migration of larval fish and crustaceans.