

Green Scene: Port Metro Vancouver wants to hear from you – maybe

by Elaine Golds

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Port Metro Vancouver has been under fire recently over their plans to vastly increase coal shipments through the Port. In June, the Metro Vancouver Board wisely passed a resolution to oppose new thermal (i.e., electricity-producing) coal shipments from the Fraser River estuary. Many people may be unaware Port Metro Vancouver is presently engaged in their third round of public consultation regarding their future land use plans and are accepting public comments until July 31. This provides a timely opportunity for people to express their views on future Port activities (see www.portmetrovancover.com for more information). The Port is also accepting public comments with the same deadline regarding a joint plan with Ports in Seattle and Tacoma to supposedly reduce their air quality emissions (<http://www.porttalk.ca/nwpcas>).

Port Metro Vancouver initiated public consultation on their Land Use Plan in 2012. Locally, a public open house was held in Coquitlam and a workshop was conducted in Port Moody last October. Unfortunately, both events were only lightly attended by members of the public. I recently attended a workshop in Surrey to review how the plan is shaping up and, again, was disappointed to see only a few members of the public present. With the recent controversy over coal shipments, I was expecting to see a few more concerned citizens in the room. However, given that the Port chose to hold this workshop on a work day, it is, perhaps, not surprising that only a few members of the public were able to attend. The land use plan, which will guide port activities for the next two decades, is expected to be finalized in 2014; thus, the time to speak up is now.

At the Surrey workshop, we were first informed of the results from the Phase 2 public consultation. Apparently, key concerns of the public were the plans for expansion of the port facilities. People wanted the Port to make better use of their existing lands and, particularly, to avoid expanding into farm lands supposedly protected under the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR). Despite this, the revised goals make no mention of avoiding impacts on the ALR. Perhaps, the Port needs to be reminded of the public's desire to avoid further loss of ALR lands to port and port-related (i.e., roads) expansions.

The draft Plan also supports the creation of new land (i.e., through landfilling) for future port uses if suitable existing lands are not available. I can only assume this means the Port intends to expand its facilities at Roberts Bank next to the BC Ferry terminal. Expansion in this area has been extremely controversial given this site has critical shoreline habitat which is part of Canada's most Important Bird Area for migratory birds. In October last year, areas around Roberts Bank were finally included in a UN Ramsar Site designation as critical wetlands but Robert Banks, equally important for migratory birds, was omitted. One way in which the Roberts Bank area could be made safer for birds would be to bury the above-ground power lines which supply the coal terminals. This would help to avoid mortalities when birds crash into the power lines especially during foggy weather. Surely, this would not be an unreasonable request for such a globally significant area for migratory birds.

One objective I was really pleased to see the Port suggesting as part of their environmental stewardship program would be getting involved with the removal of abandoned and derelict boats which can pose a safety hazard and pollute the waters. Such abandoned small boats have become a growing problem for waterfront municipalities such as Port Moody to deal with and I am pleased to see the mention of this initiative in the plan – more encouragement from the public would likely be helpful in achieving some action.

Air emissions from port traffic are a huge concern – these are mentioned in both in the draft land use plan and, more specifically, in the North West Ports Clean Air Strategy. However, I am concerned the proposed objectives are weak; for example, they are proposed to be only voluntary. In addition, if the proposed Kinder Morgan pipeline is built, greatly increased tanker traffic in Burrard Inlet to over 400 tankers per year will more than negate any potential reductions in allowable emissions per tanker. A recent Metro Vancouver report based on studies conducted in 2010/11 indicated already unacceptable emissions of sulphur dioxide and suspected carcinogens (vanadium and nickel) from marine tanker traffic in Burrard Inlet. Since then, tanker traffic has increased. Allowing overall air emissions in Burrard Inlet to increase even more should be unacceptable.

Because democracy works best when everyone participates, I encourage people to speak up and participate in these important public consultations over future port activities in the Fraser River and Burrard Inlet.