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Ports discuss countywide fiber, channel dredging at meeting

Joan Pringle Jan 10, 2017



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Dredging the Swinomish Channel and creating a county-wide broadband network were the major discussions of a joint meeting between the ports of Anacortes and Skagit on Jan. 5 at City Hall.

Kym Anderson, chief of the Army Corps of Engineers Navigation Section, gave the two commissions an update on the workings of the agency when it comes to keeping the Swinomish Channel open and navigable, a key transportation way for economic and recreational purposes.

One goal is to keep the 11 miles of the channel from Saratoga Pass to Padilla Bay dredged to 12 feet deep. Funding for dredging comes from the federal government, but dredging has to be done every few years and securing that money has been a recurring challenge.

As a result, the Army Corps has been working on a study to determine if there's a better way to handle the maintenance that would keep sediment from refilling the channel so quickly.

Scott Brown, coastal engineer with the Seattle District, reviewed a study of a particular area around Goat Island near the southern entrance to the channel that receives most of the dredging.

One option is to raise the jetty stretching from the island toward the entrance by 14 feet, Brown said. It would prevent sediment from pouring over the jetty without affecting the water salinity, which could harm salmonoids.

Anderson said the more study is needed, such as defining costs and benefits as well as a thorough evaluation of the environmental impacts. A report of those factors is expected to be available in the summer. Even so, the work would be a few years away.

The Army Corps plans to ask for additional funds to raise the jetty in 2020, Anderson said.

Kristin Meira, executive director of the Pacific Northwest Waterways Association, said that smaller ports like Skagit and Anacortes are competing with high-volume projects that continue to get funding priority.

Smaller ports receive about half the funds they did prior to 2012, Meira told the commissions.

"We need that money back, and we need it now," she said. "We also need policies so the funding does not get cut again."

Meira encouraged the ports to continually express the need to elected officials in Washington, D.C.

The PNWA is a nonprofit, nonpartisan trade association that advocates for federal policies and funding to support regional economic development and works closely with the Army Corps.

Meanwhile, the topic of bringing broadband fiber optic to the entire county has gained urgency with local officials working to draw business and industry to this area.

John Sternlicht, CEO of the Economic Development Alliance of Skagit County, said economic development will not happen without it. It's "a deal breaker if we don't have that as an asset," he said.

One possibility is to create a public/private partnership with entities throughout the county brought together by EDASC and led by the Port of Skagit, Sternlicht said.

Sara Young, Port of Skagit planning and facilities director and airport manager, said that port is working on a route model and financial model for the proposed network.

Anacortes Mayor Laurie Gere updated the two commissions on progress the city has already made to bring fiber to this community, starting with the design of a network to link all the city's water and sewage system pumps and reservoirs. The system will help create a backbone to provide fiber for residential and business internet service.

Gere said construction is expected to start this summer, and the goal will be to ultimately hook into Skagit County.

The joint port commission meeting was attended by numerous outside officials including the Skagit County commissioners, City Council members, and representatives from the offices of U.S. Reps. Rick Larsen and Suzan DelBene, Sens. Maria Cantwell and Patty Murray, and Gov. Jay Inslee.

Anacortes Executive Director Dan Worra and Skagit Executive Director Patsy Martin provided updates of their ports' holdings and recent projects, including the tree removal project at the Anacortes Airport and dredging at the Cap Sante Marina.

Martin spoke of the Skagit port's value-added agriculture program, which aims to enhance local agricultural industry, and its plans to take ownership of the former Northern State Hospital campus for the Sedro-Woolley Innovation For Tomorrow or SWIFT redevelopment project.

At the start of the meeting, the Anacortes commissioners approved the official election of officers for 2017 — John Pope as president, Keith Rubin as vice-president and Ray Niver as secretary.