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Harbor District committee weighs in on Humboldt Bay economy

John Driscoll/The Times-Standard

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A Harbor District committee charged with charting an economic course has made a series of recommendations aimed at boosting shipping, industrial, aquaculture and tourism on Humboldt Bay.

Expected to be presented to the Humboldt Bay Harbor, Recreation and Conservation District in May, the Economic Development Committee's final report holds that there is not enough business to justify building a public marine terminal at the district's Redwood Dock. Instead, the report concludes that the district should look at ways to encourage business on industrial land around the bay by helping streamline permitting and adjusting zoning.

The committee also recommends that the district should explore development of a business incubator like the city of Arcata's Alder Grove site, but one focused on maritime ventures.

The report is the summation of months of work and meetings held between May and October 2009. The committee was a group of private and public interests, including shipping, tourism, planning union representatives and Commissioner Mike Wilson, with Commissioner Patrick Higgins chairing the committee.

”I think this isn't just good news for the Harbor District ... but also, it's good news for the community,” Higgins said.

Business representatives on the committee repeatedly raised concerns about the difficulty of permitting projects, which they believe suppresses the climate for business around the bay. A streamlined approach to

permitting could shorten those hurdles and make it possible to attract capital for projects, the report reads.

The district should continue to support efforts to make Humboldt Bay a West Coast hub for Short Sea Shipping -- in which barges ship goods from smaller ports to larger ports for trans-Pacific shipping -- the report reads.

Stephen Pepper of Humboldt Maritime Logistics, which has been developing a plan for Short Sea Shipping, said that recent actions by the federal government to complete a marine highway incentive will help spur development of the project. Pepper said he expects to be engaging additional partners for the venture, and to start a West Coast market analysis of its feasibility.

He said that upcoming requirements for large ships to upgrade fuels -- and the rising cost of fuel -- will make shippers more likely to use only one port to pick up goods before crossing the Pacific. That would encourage Short Sea Shipping, he said.

The report also dives into recreational and tourism development. The committee found that the district should continue to coordinate a regional response

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to the Marine Life Protection Act, which will close some areas to fishing, and to support fishing by improving facilities around the bay. Showers could be built for the surfers and windsurfers, the report said. The district should also take the lead in permitting for trails around the bay, and work to get funding for water trails to increase ecotourism.

The district should also explore the potential for an aquaculture park, and consider expansion of environmentally responsible shellfish growing in the bay. It should also form a working group to address how polluted sites might be improved for industrial use or to act as a mitigation bank for other projects, the report reads.

Streamlining permitting for watershed restoration efforts is a recommendation of the committee, which might be achieved by working with the large number of agencies charged with approval of such projects.

The report also suggests developing a comprehensive land use plan for the Humboldt Bay area to support a regional economic development approach.

While Arcata has successfully filled its Alder Grove business park over the years, and is considering s imilar incubator projects on former industrial lands, the city sees the need for a regional approach for economic development, said Arcata Community Development Director Larry Oetker, who was on the harbor district committee. Oetker said the public sector should support private interests when they meet the objectives set by the community and environmental standards.

Oetker said that Arcata's businesses would benefit from coastal dependent businesses that might be started around the bay.

”We feel the need to grow modestly as a region,” Oetker said. “We don't see it as a threat.”

The Economic Development Committee report can be found at www.humboldtbay.org under “Quick Links.”

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