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Column / Support NEXT: For the love of Clatskanie

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Image by James Yang / The Chief

In February of 1942 - almost exactly 80 years ago - and just two months after the United States entered World War II, the federal government claimed approximately 900 acres at the point of land on the Columbia River now known as Port Westward (PW). Most of that acreage was originally wetlands that were drained and diked for agricultural purposes - something that would never be allowed today.

About a dozen farm families were given only weeks to move off the property in early 1942 so that the U.S. military could use the land and its natural deep-draft port as the Beaver Army ammunition storage and shipping point. Over the course of World War II, hundreds of tons of ammunition were brought by rail to Beaver and loaded onto ships destined for the Pacific Theatre.

During the Korean War in the early 1950s, the Beaver Base or "The Depot" as it was known to locals, was used again as an ammunition storage and shipping point. In the succeeding years it was scaled back and eventually shutdown as a military installation. It was declared surplus by the federal government in 1964, and turned over to the General Services Administration in January, 1965 for disposal. The Port of St. Helens (now Port of Columbia County), with bonds approved by voters of the district, purchased the property for \$700,000 in 1966 for the purpose of developing industry to create jobs for local citizens and tax revenues to provide Columbia County residents with the services they desire and need.

In 1967, the Port commission leased the property to Westward Properties Inc., a California corporation, and that's how it got the name "Port Westward." Without fulfilling its promise to develop the property for job-creating industry, Westward Properties transferred the lease to Kaiser Aetna which did not build an aluminum plant there. It was subleased in 1972 to Brady Hamilton, which conducted a log-loading operation for two years. Portland General Electric (PGE) assumed the lease in 1973, completing construction of the Beaver generating plant in 1975. That was the only industry at PW until PGE completed construction of its PW Generating Plant I in 2007. PW Generating Plant II went on-line in 2015.

A start-up company, Cascade Grain Products LLC completed an ethanol plant in 2008, but, with massive debt, some operational problems, and an unfavorable market by the time it finally was completed after an almost decade-long permitting process, the plant went into bankruptcy and shut down in 2009. J.H. Kelly, the major contractor which constructed the plant, bought it for pennies on the dollar, brought in more experienced personnel and updated the technology and design. Global Partners purchased it in early 2013, and continues to operate there.

PW is the largest maritime industrial site left on the lower Columbia River. It has been dedicated to industry for 66 years. For the past 80 years, it has operated either as a military base or an industrial site surrounded by farms and rural residences.

Between PGE and Global, PW currently provides about 100 family-wage jobs, while the two companies combined pay over 20 percent of all the property taxes paid in Columbia County. They also have paid the lion's share of the taxes collected by the Columbia County Development Agency's PW Urban Renewal District. Those taxes have paid for road and infrastructure improvements for increased industrial development. That assessment will disappear from our tax bills as soon as the Port of Columbia County and the county government resolve a difference of opinion about railroad and water tariffs.

In the meantime, the Clatskanie area has experienced an overall loss of jobs over the past 30 years. The largest employer and lifeblood of the local economy since 1965, the Georgia-Pacific Wauna Mill, located in Clatsop County, has scaled down over the years from the original 1100 employees to about 850.

With the change 30 years ago in the way Oregon funds its schools, the Clatskanie School District, the second largest employer in our area, lost roughly half of its employees. The fact that a tax-supported district is the second largest employer speaks volumes about the state of the local economy - officially designated as “blighted” by the state of Oregon.

Meanwhile, Clatskanie’s once vital small business community is all but dead.

At last week’s special meeting of the Clatskanie city council, called to allow NEXT Renewable Fuels the opportunity to respond to questions and concerns, several opponents of the project accused supporters of being concerned only about money, rather than the global environment and/or the simple agrarian or meditative lifestyle they prefer.

It’s interesting to note that the many of these opponents moved to the area long after PW was dedicated as an industrial site by the citizens of Columbia County and their elected leaders.

Most of us don’t have farms on which to grow our own food, and most of us need and want family-wage jobs (NEXT will start at \$90,000 per year), and good schools, well-equipped and staffed fire department and ambulance service, sheriff’s office, emergency communications district, library, park and recreation district, etc. If the \$2 billion-plus NEXT project successfully locates here it will become the largest property taxpayer in Columbia County and will triple the tax revenues for the local tax-supported districts. As a customer of the Clatskanie PUD, it will also help keep our electrical bills lower than most.

Some of the opponents seem to confuse Port Westward, the property used as a military/industrial complex for the past 80 years, with the Beaver Drainage Improvement District, which borders it and contains thousands more acres of farmland - much of it under-utilized and still available for more agriculture.

- The NEXT project will not put any local farms out of business.
- Most of the 115-acre NEXT site is part of the PW industrial site. About 25 acres of it adjoins PW and is being purchased from a willing seller - Teevin Brothers Land and Timber Company - which bought it from another willing seller.
- The project must meet all of Oregon’s Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) air and water standards, some of the strictest in the nation, as well as U.S. Army Corps of Engineers rules.
- Under Oregon’s laws, NEXT will be required by the Department of State Lands (DSL) to mitigate the acreage it is using on an almost four to one ratio. Consequently, it is purchasing a 430-acre site that has been used for grazing (not mint or blueberries or other high value farming) for the past 60 years. To meet the DSL requirements this property must be returned to a pristine wetlands state, as close as possible to what it was originally, with no non-native species.

It would seem that environmentalists would like this. After all, turning the Lower Columbia River Estuary back into wetlands is the goal of several environmental organizations. The Columbia Land Trust has just purchased over 500 acres of former hybrid cottonwood farm on the Marshland Drainage Improvement District to turn back into wetlands, with nary a peep of protest. Similarly, a former Webb District acreage was turned back into wetlands a decade ago as mitigation for a Port of Portland industrial development.

NEXT mitigation consultants are working with the board of directors of the Beaver Drainage Improvement District trying to meet both their concerns and the requirements of the DSL.

The fact remains, however, that opponents of the project are throwing mud in every direction hoping some of it will stick. The most vocal of these opponents are against any industrial project at Port Westward ever.

- NEXT's project will cut carbon emissions equal to one million cars per year.
- It will bring 240 good jobs to our community. When people work locally they are more likely to have the time and energy to serve as the community volunteers upon which Clatskanie depends for many of the programs and projects that enhance the life of our community.
- NEXT's property taxes will exponentially improve the financial situation of our schools, as well as our local and county-wide public services. The cost of those services go up every year with inflation, employee compensation, and retirement benefits. Try asking our teachers, firefighters, paramedics, police, and county road crews to work for less.

The benefits of NEXT Renewable Fuel far outweigh any disadvantages.

The best of life isn't about money, but try living without it.

My support for NEXT is about sustaining and enhancing the quality of life in the community I love.

A 5th generation resident of Clatskanie, Deborah Steele Hazen was the third generation of the Steele family to own and operate The Clatskanie Chief, serving as a reporter, editor, publisher and owner from 1968 to 2014 when she retired and sold the newspaper to Country Media.

She currently serves as a volunteer on the board of directors of the Columbia Economic Team, the Clatskanie Foundation, the Clatskanie Historical Society, and the Clatskanie Senior Citizens. She is a volunteer manager of the Clatskanie Cultural Center, and the chair of the Castle Capital Improvements Committee.