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Sea Change

By Hank Sims

Well, no one was more surprised than we were upon receiving the shocking news from the **Humboldt Bay Harbor, Recreation and Conservation District's** meeting last week, when that agency's board of directors took a stab at its upcoming budget, which looks gruesome indeed, thanks to the closure of the Evergreen Pulp Mill last year. The closure left an even-bigger-than-usual gap in the district's finances, as we noted a few weeks ago, since its major source of portage revenues was now disappeared for the immediate future. We noted that this was doubly a problem for backers of the district's longstanding plans to turn Humboldt Bay into an "entrepôt" in international trade, as it removed the only current, tangible rationale for maintaining some highly paid staff to work the big ships. And we marveled, somewhat, that Bay District CEO **David Hull** nevertheless planned to present his board of directors with a draft budget that would maintain those salaries, despite their beneficiaries having no work to perform whatsoever. (See "Town Dandy," March 19).

When the board meeting to discuss this draft rolled around last week, we pretty much expected matters to follow the pattern of recent history. The board majority might tweak the staff's draft budget here and there, but the outlines would remain. The district, we predicted, would continue on its cargo-cultish dream course until bankruptcy court came calling.

Not at all! Instead, the board sat down to its first public hearing on the draft last Thursday and didn't arise until the bloodletting was all but complete. This reporter was not present, alas, but according to reports the collective mood was something like the Republican party's welcome return to sanity after the excesses of the Bush years. (When is that coming, again?) Fiscal conservatism, apparently, was the order of the day. Apparently, staff's draft budget was all but disemboweled -- dehulled, as it were. *Times-Standard* reporter **John Driscoll's** piece the next morning noted that the board called for the layoff of one of the two bar pilots employed by the district at \$150,000 per year, and a severe reduction in salary for the other. Board members also floated the idea of defunding its director of maritime commerce position, which would account for another \$100,000 per year in savings. Taken together, these measures alone would go quite some distance toward addressing the half-million dollar deficit the board is now facing.

There's every indication that the board is serious about this and will not be deterred. For the time being, then, we can all stop talking about the great goofy vision of turning ourselves into a significant port of call in international maritime trade. It is gone, and can not be legitimately resurrected anywhere in the near- to mid-term future. The **North Coast Railroad Authority** has no plans to open service to the Bay Area. There is no infrastructure for cargo ships on Humboldt Bay. Let us turn the page.

What next? If there's an immediate beneficiary of this dash of cold water on the Bay District's collective face, that would be **Stephen Pepper**, the young tugboat captain who has been looking to institute a short-sea shipping service along the Pacific Coast for the last couple of years. Pepper's plan -- to build a bus-like barge service for cargo between Longview, Wash. and Long Beach, with stops in between at Oakland and Humboldt and possibly elsewhere -- has never had any significant opposition from any quarter. It's scaled to fit the needs of the county, and can scale up if those needs increase. Pepper's nascent company, **Humboldt Maritime Logistics**, still has a long upward climb ahead of it, but the stars seem to be aligning in its favor. A federal initiative to promote such short-sea shipping routes is just coming online, and with the Bay District's priorities now reconfigured it can devote more attention to the project.

"Right now we're engaging our local agencies, and we're engaging the Maritime Administration as a project under their new marine highway program," Pepper said Monday. "We're engaging the California Transportation Commission. We're engaging the private sector, to look for financing. We're looking at a number of different ways to get off the ground."

Pepper believes he needs only about \$5.5 million in financing to become operational, the bulk of which would go to equipping Eureka's Schneider Dock with a new crane. Also, he'd initially have to work out some sort of arrangement with a tugboat and barge company. But if he manages to get up and running, he'd provide Humboldt County with a definitely greener and almost certainly cheaper method of moving product in and out of the area, and -- if patterns hold -- with almost zero opposition. What a thing that would be.

That leaves us with the fallow railroad line, whose dreams of a massive economic stimulus infusion will soon be dashed. Anyone have any ideas there?

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