

The Port Commissioner: A Briefing Paper

by Thomas J. Dowd

You, as a port commissioner, are responsible for both the current operations and future direction of your port. This public policy task is both complex and challenging and requires considerable leadership skill.

This paper is addressed primarily to new commissioners, but may also be of interest to experienced commissioners and staff. It provides an overview and basic information about the responsibilities of a port commissioner and discusses the importance of efficient and effective port management. It also provides information on planning, policy development, and management techniques that you can use to improve your performance as a commissioner.

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The Starting Point

First, you must understand your legislated authority and the powers of your port. The legal authority of your port is usually set out in the state law or city code/charter in the United States and in federal or provincial legislation in Canada. This information should be available from the port's executive director/manager.

Second, you must know the mission statement, goals and objectives, and general operating policy of your port. Developing a Port Mission Statement, goals/objectives, and general operating policy is the responsibility of each port commission. These documents should be available from the president or secretary of your port commission or the executive director/manager. Sometimes this information is included as part of the port's handbook for commissioners.

Basic Commission Functions

Planning

The basic function of a port commissioner is to help plan the port's future and then guide the port's activities in that direction. Planning is an essential activity for your port, yet it is often overlooked because it is hard work, time-consuming, and competes directly with other management activities. Planning is important because it enhances the ability of the port to adapt to changing conditions. It reduces the chance of lost opportunities, since a long lead time is now the rule rather than the exception for most of the port's major projects/activities. Planning minimizes crisis in management situations.

Planning is a process that involves the port commission, the executive director/manager, the port's staff, customers, and citizens/voters.

Planning begins with the creation of a Mission Statement and is followed by the development of broad but quantifiable goals and objectives for your port. All too often, a lack of direction by a port commission can be traced to the absence of a Mission Statement and stated port goals and objectives. Successful development of a Mission Statement and port goals and objectives will be the direct result of a joint effort by the port commission and the executive director/manager to identify the major activities of the port for the future.

In the planning process, the port should address the following questions:

- What community needs can your port address?
- What potential opportunities are available to your port?
- Which opportunities are consistent with your port's physical, environmental, and economic limitations?
- Which opportunities are within the power and authority of your port?
- What are the important impacts of feasible alternatives?
- What opportunities should be pursued?

From this question, study, and analysis process come the Mission Statement and the quantified goals and objectives of your port. An example of a port goal might be to develop an 80-acre light industrial park by 1996, or an additional 100 acres of container terminal by 1997. Such quantifiable goals permit your commission to determine if the port is making progress toward achieving its goals.

Policy

After port goals and objectives are identified, the commission must develop strategies or the policy for

implementing these goals. Policy is nothing more than a well-thought-out statement of the method or general approach to achieve an objective. In other words, policy is an effective way of defining boundaries of acceptable action in pursuit of objectives. An example of a policy for a port seeking to promote development of a large industrial park might be to limit promotional activities to 10 percent of the port budget.

To be effective, you must not only develop port policy, but formalize it in writing and distribute it to all with decision-making authority. Policies must be evaluated often to see that they are leading to goal attainment. If not, they should be modified.

Port policy simplifies decision-making. It can be compared to a road map to be followed to a given destination. Policy helps clarify the thinking of all and facilitates consistent decisions. It replaces doubt with certainty and transforms an objective into a cause.

"Considering Strategic Planning For Your Port," a paper in the Washington Sea Grant "Port Management Series," provides additional information on how a port commission can implement its planning and policy responsibilities.

Management Techniques

Besides planning and policy development functions, port commissioners face a variety of other tasks. Successfully handling this workload requires good management techniques. Some of the more important ones are discussed here. These techniques can lead to more efficient use of your limited time and to better and more informed decisions.

Sticking to Your Job

Commissioners often want to get involved in every activity of their port, but not everything needs port commission input and/or action. Port commissioners should not micro-manage the port. The day-to-day management of the port is the executive director's/manager's responsibility. To have an efficiently run port, the commissioners must learn to delegate responsibility and respect delegated authority. Let the executive director/manager and port staff function in their areas of authority. Do not meddle in their affairs. Spend your time working on your areas of responsibility. Make sure you are getting your job done at the policy level.

Setting Priorities

Not every issue needs your or the port commission's immediate attention. Simply stated, some issues are more important than others. Manage your limited time by first establishing a set of priority issues for your port and then seeking to resolve each issue based on its importance. Priorities should be reevaluated whenever new issues emerge or conditions change. Establishing priorities contributes to better overall decision-making. It gives important order to a complex management task and is a starting point for action.

Doing Homework

Few people have the ability or luck to be right much of the time without a full understanding of the problems that face them. Preparation prior to commission meetings is the key ingredient to successful commission action. Never fail to do your homework; if you do, it will show. Plan your time so that you can prepare adequately. Seek answers from your fellow commissioners and the executive director/manager on any areas that you are unsure of or do not understand!

Communicating

A key factor in effective port management is communications. The linkage is a two-way system! The executive director/manager must communicate with the commissioners on a regular basis between formal commission meetings, and commissioners must communicate with the executive director/manager between formal commission meetings. This latter linkage is extremely important since commissioners obtain information from constituents and others who may not be likely to communicate directly with the executive director/manager.

Obtaining Additional Input

As a port commissioner, you need to recognize your limitations. No one person has all the information and insight to make the right decision all of the time. Getting things done right and on time often requires added resources. You can increase your ability to resolve issues by working closely with the executive director/manager and, through the executive director, his/her staff, citizen groups, and other interested parties. Often, the study of an issue by an assembly of interested people results in a more informed decision. Commissioners must take full advantage of opportunities to work with others when studying and analyzing an issue.

In order to function effectively, external/ advisory committees must know *specifically* what they are to do and when they must complete their task. In order to maintain communications with the commission and to ensure timely completion of committee activities, a single commissioner should be an ex-officio member of each committee. Commissioners, when working with appointed committees, must use their own role wisely as port officials and should strive to make maximum use of the external/advisory committee's expertise.

It is important to remember that the commission will make the ultimate decisions, taking into account the well-being of the entire port; the external/advisory committee's role is to advise the commission.

Following Through

Good intentions are the beginnings of action. Follow-through makes it happen. Many times commissioners are well motivated, but they do not follow through, push for action, or move for closure; therefore, nothing happens. The onus for action always remains with the port commissioner. Exert your leadership and personally follow issues through to action.

Conclusions

In order for any port to function at peak efficiency, there must be a teamwork relationship between the commission and the executive director/manager and among the commissioners themselves. These teamwork relationships are critical!

Port commissioners are required to make informed decisions about many complex issues. The position of port commissioner is both difficult and challenging. To be successful, you must quickly and clearly perceive what you personally and corporately can and cannot do. You must understand the legislative authority of the commission and powers of the port, know the port's mission, goals and objectives, and general operating policies. You must recognize that planning and policy development are the basic functions of the port commission and then diligently work at those tasks.

As a commissioner, you can improve your management effectiveness by: delegating responsibility and respecting delegated authority, establishing priorities, obtaining additional input to resolve issues, sticking to your job, doing the necessary homework, and following through. These aids to management can make your term in office both productive and personally satisfying.

A portion of the information presented in this paper has been adopted from an earlier publication, "Oregon Port Commissioners: Suggestions for Effective Port Management" (Oregon State University Extension Service) with the kind permission of Oregon State University.

About the Author

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