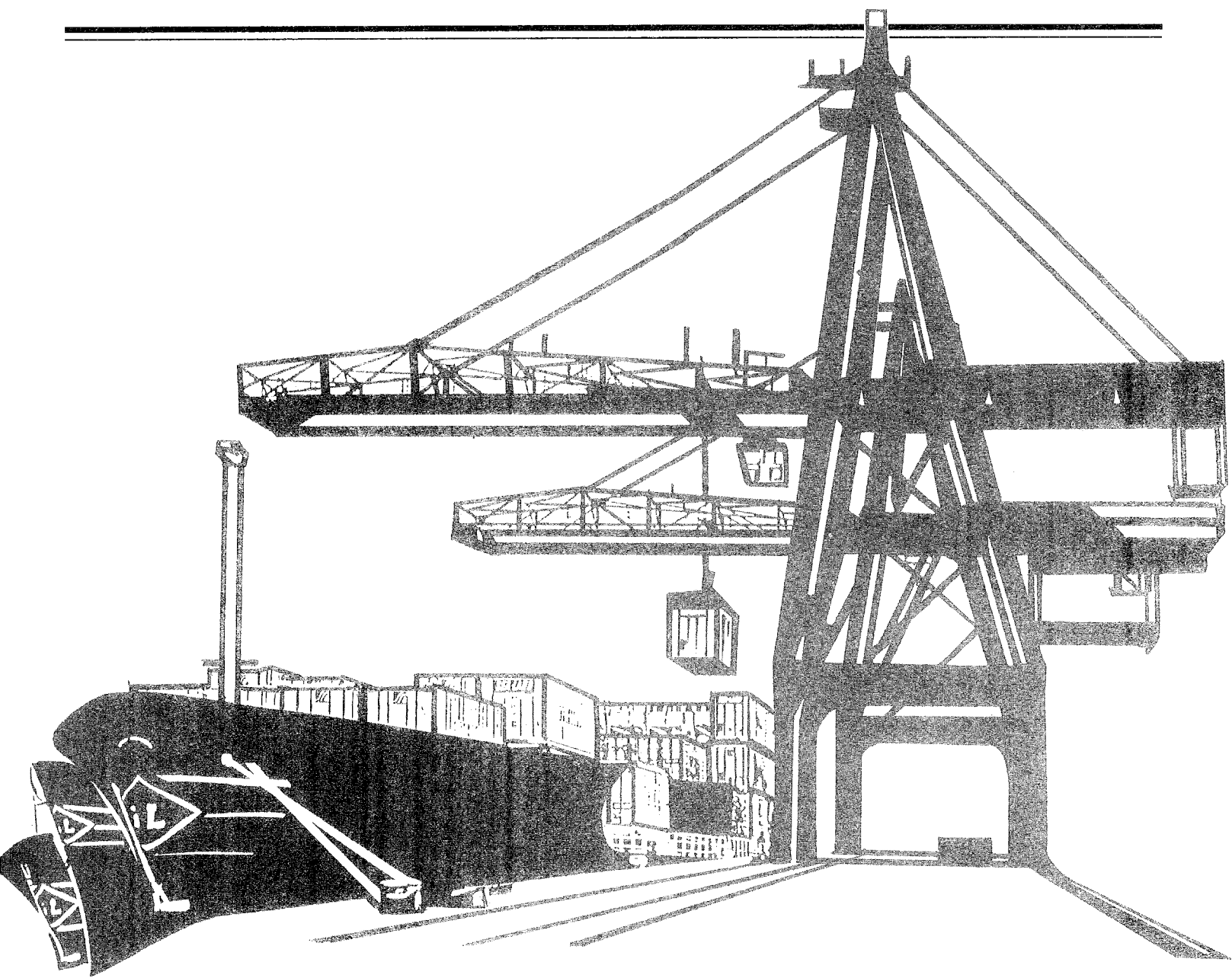

Fire Island
A Maritime Center
for the North Pacific



A Report by Commonwealth North

A report by
The Commonwealth North
Railroad Committee

First Printing....June 1988

935 West Third Avenue
Anchorage, Alaska 99501

Except for reviews for the public press, this report may not be reproduced in whole or in part without written permission. For information, please write Commonwealth North, 935 West Third Avenue, Anchorage, Alaska 99501.

Fire Island

A Maritime Center for the North Pacific

A report by Commonwealth North

Fire Island

A Maritime Center for the North Pacific

Cities as far away as Unalaska in the Aleutian Islands have expressed the need for Anchorage to take the initiative to establish a maritime center for the North Pacific. At present, these communities must rely on Seattle, Tacoma and Portland for critical supplies, expertise and financing. Anchorage is ideally suited to step into this role in terms of professional skills, Alaska-specific expertise and location. A major requirement, however, is to upgrade the existing infrastructure and create a world-class port facility at Anchorage.

The current Port of Anchorage has been one of the true success stories of the southcentral region. To expand its role and services, however, would be difficult. First of all, it is confined to a 110-acre area. Secondly, mid-winter ice restricts the flow of commerce.

In reviewing other locations, Fire Island, in close proximity to Anchorage, is by far the most appropriate alternative. There is ample acreage for needed facilities. In addition, the island provides physical separation from the residential mainland areas.

Since before World War II, Anchorage visionaries and planners have conceptualized a port at Fire Island. Beginning with a Corps of Engineers study in 1948, Fire Island has been the logical alternative for a more accessible, nearly ice-free and more expansive port location. While such a port would serve many uses, the principal functions would be for freight and commercial use and support of the North Pacific fishery industry. In addition, if the Navy decides to establish a home port in Alaska, this facility would be a natural location.

What are the benefits to the State of Alaska?

Better use of public funds

- Utilization of federal and state funds for construction of a major facility at Fire Island may be more cost effective than the proposed project to dredge the Knik Arm Shoal.

Fire Island would be the most cost effective location for constructing new dock facilities because of the ample source of backfill by dredging in the adjacent Cook Inlet area or excavating onshore.

- Expansion of the Alaska Railroad to this location would result in a significant increase in freight and utilization of the railroad.
- Fire Island could provide an attractive location to the Navy thereby resulting in a selection of an Alaskan location for a new home port.

What are the benefits for neighboring communities?

- If Fire Island attracts a large naval ship such as a battleship or an aircraft carrier, support ships will need to be located nearby at other Cook Inlet ports.
- A dock facility at Pt. MacKenzie, as envisioned by the Mat-Su Borough, is not threatened by this project. Increased economic activity from a North Pacific maritime center at Fire Island would spin off and assist the Pt. MacKenzie facility as well as most of the other communities on Cook Inlet.

What are the benefits to the Municipality of Anchorage?

- The location on Fire Island will lead to the development of a new, more accessible commercial port for the Municipality in close proximity to the international airport.
- Deep water at this location allows deeper draft vessels to utilize the new facility which means more freight coming through the Port of Anchorage.
- The extension of the railroad past International Airport could connect light-rail passenger service from the international and domestic air terminals to the Alaska Railroad system. This connection could open up the possibilities for light-rail service to downtown Anchorage, Girdwood, Portage, Whittier, Seward, and recreation destinations to the north such as Eagle River, Matanuska Valley and Denali National Park.
- The construction of a causeway including rail extension, pipeline, road and utility corridor to Fire Island as well as the construction of the initial Fire Island port and onshore facilities will provide construction opportunities and a much needed boost for the state and local economies.
- This transportation corridor opens up approximately 4,200 acres of land on Fire Island for a planned commercial development.

- The possible siting of a naval facility in the Anchorage area will provide benefits to the local economy due to the presence of Naval personnel, requirements for additional housing, services and utilities.

What are the advantages to the Navy?

There are two potential deep water ports on Fire Island: one at the north end near Race Point; the other at the southern tip of the island. The southerly tip is probably the most logical location for a Navy home port, leaving the northern face of the island for commercial and fisheries uses. Fire Island offers several advantages to the Navy including:

- The central geographic location of Fire Island, adjacent to the major population and business center of the state, will provide significant benefits to the morale of Naval personnel, especially for those stationed at the proposed facility with families living in the community.
- The sociological infrastructure for housing, schools, libraries, sports and cultural facilities, hospitals, fuel supplies, surface and air transportation and all other support utilities and services already exist in Anchorage. These amenities are underutilized, producing attractive cost-saving opportunities for the Navy.
- A major military infrastructure already exists at Elmendorf Air Force Base and Ft. Richardson Army Post to lend support to a Navy home port in Anchorage.
- The location of this facility within five miles of Anchorage International Airport, the major air crossroads of the state, accommodates the need to access worldwide air transportation.
- Sufficient land at Fire Island would provide room for shore facilities and the availability of inexpensive gravel for construction of the yards and pads on land.
- The creation of a naval yard on Fire Island would alleviate the competition for space with other users which would occur at other existing ports. The available land at Fire Island would provide room for future growth for the Navy.
- A location at Fire Island would facilitate security precautions as access would be more easily controlled than at most locations on the mainland.

What construction will be required?

There are various potential locations for commercial-sized docks on Fire Island. These facilities and the proposed transportation corridor from the Anchorage mainland will result in certain construction considerations. Some of the facilities envisioned include:

- A sheet pile, (or steel cell) earth-filled facility with low maintenance, deep draft capability

- Approximately 3 miles of tidelands causeway
- Seven miles of new railroad track and upgrade of approximately 2.5 miles of existing track and roadbed
- A highway and fuel pipelines over the causeway to the new dock location
- Power, telephone, natural gas and other utility services to the facilities
- Docking facilities for the Municipality and the Navy with extensive additional space available for future growth for potential work yards, onshore facilities, storage yards and other uses
- Local sewage treatment facilities on the island or construction of a force main back to the Point Woronzof facility on the mainland.

Note: The capability exists to provide the required fill through dredging in front of the dock while also improving draft. This approach would provide \$1-2 per-cubic-yard material versus \$9-10 per-cubic-yard material if fill is trucked to the site.

What will be the future of the current Anchorage dock?

The current flow of containerized cargo, the largest component of the current Anchorage port traffic, will continue to land and be disbursed from the Anchorage dock. Tourism will be another major focus.

If the central railyard is moved to Eagle River (see Commonwealth North report, “Redesigning the Front Door to Anchorage”) the existing port and environs will be made more attractive for visitor-related uses such as cruise ships, sightseeing and private vessels in a coordinated effort with the planned Ship Creek Landing development.

What other issues need to be addressed?

Land

The major landowner on Fire Island is Cook Inlet Region, Inc. The U.S. Coast Guard manages the Race Point and West Point acreage which are the prime locations for a major port facility. The Federal Aviation Administration, which used to control the entire island, has retained 571 acres which includes an airfield, a Vortac site and an access road.

The Municipality of Anchorage will need approximately 1500 acres to establish a world-class port facility which can serve as a maritime center in the North Pacific region. Arrangements must be made with Cook Inlet Region and the federal agencies. It is assumed that CIRI would welcome the opportunity to sell or lease the needed lands for this purpose because of the potential for future development of the island and its resources. Another option would be for the Municipality to master lease the island and sublease to other users.

In addition, a cooperative arrangement would need to be worked out with the Coast Guard for shared use.

Environment

This type of development will require the preparation of a comprehensive Environmental Impact Statement to assure adequate coordination with affected groups and individuals and the consideration of potential impacts to the environment.

Some issues which will need to be addressed in the analysis include:

- The impact of this development on anadromous fish populations passing through Cook Inlet
- The impact, if any, of causeway, dock or onshore construction on wetlands
- The impacts of development on migratory waterfowl or marine mammals
- The impact on archaeological sites.

Access

There are several alternatives for a rail corridor route from the existing line to Fire Island.

A route through the airport is the most direct. This corridor already exists, is industrial in nature, and does not disturb residential neighborhoods. It would require an underground section similar to many other highway/rail/airport combinations around the world. The rail and airport proximity created by this route has potential for providing additional services for both freight and passenger purposes.

Lead Agency

At the outset, the Port of Anchorage should be encouraged to advance the Fire Island port concept. The Mat-Su and Kenai Boroughs might be interested in joining with the Anchorage Municipality to establish a Cook Inlet Port Authority to lead this project and oversee its management for the benefit of the entire region.

Conclusion

The Fire Island location and the advantages it offers in terms of economical construction make it the most logical choice for a maritime center for the North Pacific. This site offers the only place in Alaska which has the existing infrastructure to support a major influx of population, including the resulting demand for services and supplies to support the facility.

The current economy makes the infrastructure in Anchorage significantly underutilized, providing an attractive and competitive situation. Therefore, not only is Fire Island a prime location, the timing for action is opportune.

Commonwealth North is a nonprofit corporation organized and existing under the laws of the State of Alaska. Non-partisan in nature, its purpose is to inject enlightened vitality into the world of commerce and public policy.

In addition to providing a forum for national and international speakers, working committees study critical issues facing the state and nation and prepare well-researched action papers, such as this one.

The Commonwealth North Railroad Committee

Loren Lounsbury, Chairman
Frank Danner, Vice Chairman
Dick Barnes
Bob Bulmer
Robert Dickson
Joe Griffith
Joe Hayes
David Heatwole
John Herring

Walter J. Hickel
Max Hodel
Ray Latchem
Jeff Lowenfels
Jim McElroy
Malcolm Roberts
Ron Sheardown
Jim Yarmon

The Commonwealth North Board of Directors

Governor Walter J. Hickel, Founding Co-Chairman
Max Hodel, President
Loren Lounsbury, Vice President
Joe L. Hayes, Vice President
Frank G. Turpin, Vice President
Sue Linford, Secretary
Bob Bulmer, Treasurer
Richard F. (Dick) Barnes
Carl F. Brady, Sr.
David L. Chatfield
Roy M. Huhndorf

Archbishop Francis T. Hurley
Jeff Lowenfels
Dean Nelson
George N. Nelson
Governor Bill Sheffield
Judge James Singleton
William J. Tobin
William Wade
Connie Yoshimura
Malcolm Roberts, Executive Director