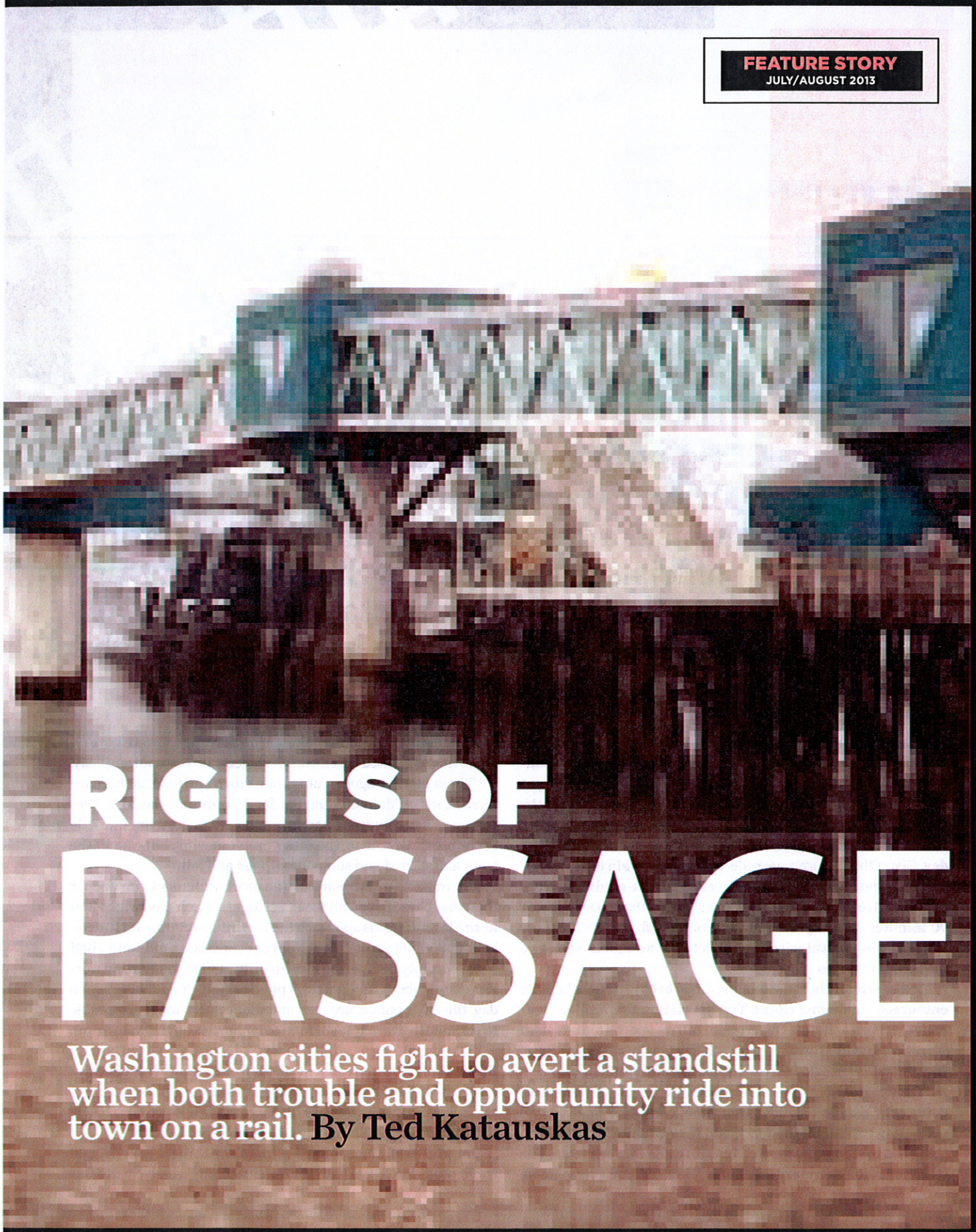


RIGHTS OF PASSAGE

Washington cities fight to avert a standstill when both trouble and opportunity ride into town on a rail. By Ted Katauskas

PHOTOGRAPH BY KYLE JOHNSON

T'S REALLY MORE SAD THAN FUNNY, but Mayor Dave Earling chuckles about the visit of a delegation of state transportation officials to Edmonds earlier this year. During their 20-minute stay, those officials were forced to witness firsthand the havoc that freight trains are wreaking on his city's waterfront.

Home to a 900-slip marina, a dive park, four restaurants, an office building, condominiums, a senior center, and the second-busiest landing in the state ferry system, Edmonds's waterfront also happens to be fenced off from the inland side of the city by the tracks of Burlington Northern's main line, transited by some 36 north- or southbound freight and passenger trains on a typical day. Given that the average mile-long freight train takes 200 or more seconds to clear each of the city's two at-grade crossings (at Main Street and, three blocks away, West Dayton Street), for 90 minutes each day the railway isolates Edmonds's business district from its waterfront as effectively as a moat with two raised drawbridges.

That's certainly how the scene seemed to have struck the state entourage—including House Transportation Committee chair Judy Clibborn and state Department of Transportation assistant secretary David Moseley—who watched, astonished, as three freight trains trundled across the tracks, one after the other.

"They got to experience the arms coming down and the alarms going off," recalls Earling. "One time, cars were loading and unloading on and off the ferry, and they could see how everything had to stop while the freight train came through town. The transportation secretary asked me, 'How did you ever plan on having this many trains coming through while we were here?'"

Earling explained that it wasn't staged, nor was it an anomaly.

"Three months ago, a train broke down and blocked both intersections of Main and Dayton for 45 minutes," he adds. "Pedestrians were jumping between rail cars to get from one side to the other. Of course, the cars weren't moving, but what if the train had started and someone slipped and fell?"

The impacts of Edmonds's transportation moat run deeper than just commerce and freak accidents. Each day brings 360 horn blasts as trains approach the two intersections; at 110 decibels, that's loud enough to disrupt conversation a mile and a half away, severely hampering local quality of life. And Earling worries deeply about fundamental public safety: for 1.5 hours each day, the city's police, fire, and ambulance personnel are unable to respond in a timely fashion to emergencies on the waterfront.

"Try explaining to someone who's having a heart attack on the ferry or at the port that he needs to wait another four or five minutes while the train is passing before we can dispatch our paramedics," the mayor says. "If there is a fire, as we have had at the port, and there's a train, that becomes problematic."

But what really makes Earling lose sleep at night is the freight traffic study by CH2M Hill that the city commissioned in 2005 as

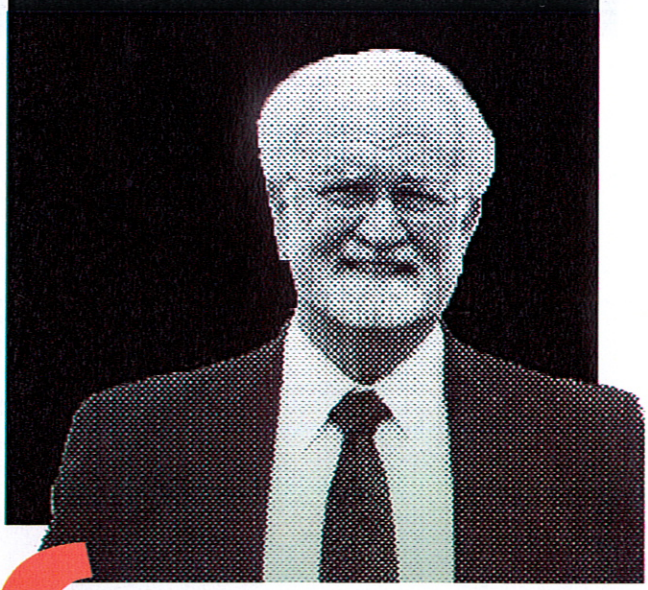
due diligence for a proposed $238 million ferry dock move and overpass, a project scuttled by the recession. That analysis projected that the number of trains transiting Burlington Northern's main line would nearly double (to 70 trains a day) by 2020 and ultimately nearly triple (to 104 trains per day) by 2030.

"That would shut down the waterfront," stresses Earling, who notes that train delays already have forced the cancellation of two ferry sailings a day. "It makes it almost unrealistic for us to take that kind of load."

Add to that vision the specter of coal trains, and it's a wonder Earling sleeps at all.

THE GATEWAY PACIFIC TERMINAL (GPT), the furthest along in the permitting process of two massive coal-export terminals proposed for Washington, would add up to 18 additional mile-and-a-half-long trains a day to Burlington Northern's main line traffic. Under the GPT's proposal, each year 60 million tons of coal strip-mined from the Powder River Basin of Wyoming and Montana would be transported by train to a deep-water terminal at Cherry Point, north of Bellingham, where it would be loaded onto massive ships bound for China. Because of the Brobdingnagian weights involved—four locomotives hauling up to 150 fully loaded hopper cars weighing an average of 143 tons each—the coal trains would avoid remote mountain passes and travel along the Columbia River Gorge to Longview, then parallel I-5 northward through the Puget Sound region, the state's most densely populated, passing through the hearts of Centralia, Tacoma, Seattle, Edmonds, Everett, Mount Vernon, and Bellingham.

The Millennium Bulk Terminal, another coal-export facility proposed to replace the shuttered Reynolds Aluminum smelter in Longview, would export up to 50 million additional tons of coal to China annually. For Washington cities on Burlington Northern's Columbia River line between Spokane and Longview,



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> EDMONDS MAYOR

that would mean another 12 to 15 coal trains a day in addition to the 18 bound for Bellingham.

In downtown Bingen, a Columbia River city of 730 near White Salmon, the Burlington Northern tracks parallel Steuben Street, a nine-block stretch of Highway 14, a major east-west freight corridor for semi trucks transiting the Columbia River Gorge. As in Edmonds, those tracks cleave the city's business district from its port—in Bingen's case, the Port of Klickitat, a recreational marina and industrial park that's home to a burgeoning cluster of aerospace firms, including Insitu, Bingen's largest employer, where the number of staff on payroll eclipses the city's population. And as in Edmonds, Bingen's waterfront is only accessible via two at-grade crossings. Although Bingen has yet to experience significant backups due to freight traffic, Mayor Betty Barnes and City Administrator Jan Brending worry that future rail congestion could make it difficult to retain key employers like Insitu and lure new businesses to the port.

"Nobody wants to wait for a train, whether it's 2 minutes or 20 minutes," stresses Brending. "In today's world, nobody wants to wait."

Then there's the issue of public safety.

"The at-grade crossings are the only way in and out of the port," she adds. "If there were a significant railroad incident, if a train derailed, getting emergency services in and out of the port would become more difficult."

With that prospect in mind, the city has proposed building a $25 million railroad overpass, a seemingly unattainable sum in light of Bingen's $3.5 million annual general fund budget. As a first step in competing for dwindling federal and state infrastructure grants, the city plans to commission a $300,000 freight mobility study, an earmark that's included in the Legislature's yet-to-be-passed transportation budget.

"It was our representatives who came up with the idea of having a freight mobility study," Barnes explains. "They're very supportive of this and are trying to make the case for it, to see, before we spend millions on an overpass, what the conditions are here."

Both Barnes and Brending stress that although coal train traffic is what's driving the conversation about freight congestion statewide, addressing the spike in semi truck traffic is every bit as critical. Each day, more than a hundred big rigs rumble through Bingen's downtown, bypassing the higher taxes and permitting fees of Oregon's Interstate 84 for Washington's Highway 14, and the problem only seems to be getting worse as the economy starts to hum.

"We are a community that is highly impacted by freight because of the highway and the railway," Brending concludes. "Until the questions about coal started coming up, as a city we never really thought about it that way.

"The whole general topic of transportation is tough for all cities. Transportation infrastructure across the nation is suffering because there's just not enough money right now to fund everything. And it's going to continue to suffer until we find some funding mechanism at all levels to improve and maintain infrastructure."

Fifty miles down the tracks in Washougal, Mayor Sean Guard echoes this sentiment.

"For us, I don't think it's an issue of coal," he says. "With diesel prices, it's less expensive to move freight by barge and train and truck. Exports and imports are picking up, and that's good for the economy. But the question for us is: as freight congestion increases, does having multiple separated grade crossings make one community more attractive to live and work in than one that doesn't'?"

Washougal, which also lies on Burlington Northern's main line and sees the same amount of freight traffic as Edmonds, has five at-grade railroad crossings and a railroad overpass. That overpass happens to be just three blocks from the city's police

and fire stations, so building another separated grade crossing isn't a matter of public safety; it's about convenience and competitiveness. Guard explains that coal trains, which take a long time to gain speed due to the weights involved, are especially problematic, noting that he recently clocked the wait while idling behind the gates at the city's busiest intersection as a westbound coal train started moving through the intersection the moment an eastbound freight train cleared the signal. Total snarl time: 17 minutes. The remedy: a $12 million overpass, $2 million more than the city's annual general fund budget.

"For some communities, it's a matter of public safety; for us, it's truly not," Guard says. "There are grants and loans out there, so it's all about how competitive you are, how good a story you can put together."

IN THAT REGARD, Edmonds trumps most.

Just what Gateway Pacific's proposal means for Puget Sound cities like Edmonds, already reeling from an uptick in freight train traffic, was spelled out in the starkest of terms in a four-page memorandum sent by a traffic planning engineer from Everett-based Gibson Traffic Consultants to Edmonds Public Works Director Phil Williams on May 22, 2012:

"Each train may be over 1.5 miles long, which at 50 miles per hour would mean approximately 3–4 minutes between train approach warning/gate close and ultimate gate opening. At 35 miles per hour, it could take approximately 6–7 minutes to clear a crossing. . . . The 18 trains per day would equate to approximately one additional coal train every 1.3 hours, all day long, in addition to existing traffic."

The engineer's conclusion:

"This preliminary analysis suggests potentially severe consequences for the city's transportation plan and improvements, with increases in risk of accidents, impacts to the city's levels of service, ability to provide effective emergency response times, waterfront/downtown unification plans, state ferry route impacts and possible interference with local freight delivery systems important to the city's economic recovery."

Two months later, on July 13, 2012, Edmonds's city council unanimously adopted Resolution 1280, expressing concern about the proposed Gateway Pacific Terminal and asking that a study of the terminal's potential impacts on Edmonds's economy, public health, and safety be included in the terminal's environmental review. The resolution also stipulated that the proposed facility's owner (Goldman Sachs–backed SSA Marine) pay for any infrastructure upgrades that might be required to mitigate deleterious impacts from the terminal (such as the $80 million Main Street "emergency underpass" Mayor Earling had unveiled at a city-backed "Don't Block Our Beach" public rally at the ferry terminal

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> WASHOUGAL MAYOR

two days earlier). In January, Williams included the ordinance as an attachment to a two-page scoping comment letter addressed to the US Army Corps of Engineers, the Washington Department of Ecology, and the Whatcom County planning department, asking the agencies to include the impacts of rail traffic, and mitigation, in the Gateway Pacific Terminal's Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), stressing that "this is an issue of public safety for the City of Edmonds and several other cities in this state."

"Edmonds requests the scope of the EIS include a detailed study of the baseline interference to traffic patterns between trains and vehicle traffic at both Dayton and Main streets and then project the change in those patterns out to the year 2030, including, but not limited to, projected coal train traffic," Williams wrote. "The study should identify possible alternatives to resolving these conflicts which can be analyzed as possible mitigation for this project."

Nevertheless, at a hearing before the US House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce on June 18, the US Army Corps of Engineers chief of regulatory programs announced that the scope of the Gateway Pacific Terminal's Environmental Impact Statement would be confined to the facility itself and would not include any potential upstream or downstream impacts, such as increased railroad traffic, in its analysis. That announcement effectively scuttled any chance that railroad traffic mitigation measures—such as Edmonds's proposed underpass—might be required as a condition of permit approval. (At the hearing, Seattle Mayor Mike McGinn testified about the impacts of rail traffic on his city and its Puget Sound neighbors, asking, "Shouldn't some agency be charged with examining all the impacts? … I believe the decision by the Corps should not be allowed to stand." For more on the hearing and McGinn's testimony, see "Terminal Gravity" on page 17.)

With mitigation off the table, Edmonds and other cities are scrambling for ways to pay for a railway overpass or underpass. Given that rail traffic is expected to triple by 2030 whether or not any coal-export terminals ever get built, one might expect Burlington Northern to bear the brunt of any mitigation measures, but that's not the case. Thanks to federal law dating back to the mid-19th century—when the government, in the interest of spurring railroads to help settle the American West, granted easements and other economic incentives in perpetuity—the Federal Railway Administration limits the liability of railroads for mitigation measures like overpass construction to just 5 percent of a project's total cost.

"If you're looking at $80 million, 5 percent is just background noise," Williams says. "I can't see the railroad paying $80 million to fix this, and there's no legal angle you can take to force them to do that. Their right to use that real estate trumps property rights, and to be candid, that has always bothered me. They stand to benefit if any one of those terminals get built. Their attitude is, 'We're getting paid to haul coal whether it's going to Washington or Canada, so just get used to it.' … I don't know what the solution is."

For Earling, part of the solution entails telling his city's freight-congestion story to whoever will listen, a tactic he urges fellow mayors to emulate.

"On the 24th of July at a Joint Transportation Committee hearing in Centralia, I will be speaking with other mayors, as graphically as I can," he says. "It is not just a coal train issue. It's about the impact that the number of trains by 2030 will have on cities."

To see firsthand what Earling's talking about, just take the ferry to Edmonds and meet the mayor at the landing. But understand that if there's a train passing through town, he may be more than a few minutes late.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MATT D'ANNUNZIO