

My Word – Sunday, January 26, 2014, Harboring Hope

By Karen Brooks

History is waiting to be written. January hallmarks a new beginning as four agencies form a new committee charged with collaborating and coordinating a comprehensive vision and plan for Humboldt Bay's Harbor. This effort is historic because for the very first time the Harbor, the County, the Wiyot and the City of Eureka – the agencies with authority on the harbor – meet as equal partners with the goal to transform a nineteenth-century harbor into a modern green port on the Pacific Rim.

This transformation is launched from a unified resolution to create jobs; not minimum wage jobs – but the type of good paying jobs that come from international commerce and navigation. Our harbor is closer to the Russian and Asian markets than other California ports and over 1,000 acres of marine-dependent, industrially-zoned land await opportunity. We can transform our harbor and with it our tax base to rebuild our aging infrastructure and declining enrollment schools.

Optimism is tempered. The dreams of many hard-working, well-intentioned people haven't been realized and it's easy to say it's not possible. This harbor has languished and every step forward seems marked by dozens of steps not taken. A storm of variables must come together to usher in transformational success.

The work of this four-agency committee is daunting but together they can accomplish exponentially more than separately. How can each agency prepare individual legislative agendas, prioritize and compete for Brownfield funding, rebuild and maintain infrastructure, plan and respond for emergencies, market for national and international projects, market available land and navigate regulatory hurdles, and so on, in a vacuum? We learned through the Marine Life Protection process that we can work towards better outcomes, in fact, we must.

The harbor only spans the area between the Samoa Bridge and Fields Landing with each agency bearing responsibilities far beyond the waterfront and uplands. And while small, this area holds tremendous economic potential. Past economic modeling predicted 3,000 new jobs with a \$90 million payroll comprising \$400 million in gross regional product that could be realized from 5 million metric tons of cargo annually. Currently, harbor-related activity is only about 10% of its capacity.

Modernization will require at least a billion dollar investment coming from private and public funds. That's a lot of jobs! From a national and international perspective it seems inevitable. How can an under-developed, naturally deep-water port with available land not be a hub for commerce? From a state and local perspective it seems a necessity; just as the timber era has ebbed so too will our illegal cash crop. Our collective foresight and planning, including the political will to see it through, can be the tipping point to finally realize a world-class, nimble green port.

As a member of the Humboldt Bay Harbor Working Group, HBHWG, a grassroots citizen action group, I applaud the members of this new four-agency committee for their commitment to work together for the betterment of our north state region. It is my hope that we will look back on this time and say, "This was the dawn of a new history for our harbor!" Future generations hope so too.

If you want a closer look, join us for an educational Noon luncheon at the Samoa Cookhouse the last Wednesday of each month. This Wednesday, January 29th, will feature speakers who will delve into Short Sea Shipping. Visit our website at www.humboldtworkingport.org to learn more.

Karen Brooks resides with her family in Bayside. She has been a member of the HBHWG since 2012 and a member of the Executive Committee. For the past 30-years she has been working with local businesses and is currently an entrepreneurial coordinator.