

City should go slow on Port 460

Opponents have raised enough valid questions about the proposed Port 460 warehousing and logistics that the Suffolk City Council would be wise to hit the pause button.

We're not ready to call for rejection of the massive 540-acre project, but the city has a lot more due diligence — and listening — to do before we can give it our full-throated endorsement.

When City Councilman Tim Johnson, who's not been known for hyperbole or overreaction during his distinguished tenure on the council, said in a public meeting that the push to rezone the proposed site off Route 460 has lacked transparency, it got our attention. Throw in a less-than-unanimous endorsement from the city's Planning Commission and we're convinced that the council would do the community a disservice by hastily approving the project next month.

Plans call for 10 warehouse buildings and 24,000 square feet of retail and restaurant space fronting 460, also known as Pruden Boulevard. Despite promises of 2,600 construction jobs, about 9,000 jobs once the project is built out, and up to \$34.1 million in property tax revenue for the city, the project got the shakiest of endorsements from the Planning Commission after a recent two-hour public hearing. An initial motion to rezone the land died for lack of a second. Then a motion to deny the rezoning failed on a 5-3 vote. Finally, a second motion for approval passed 5-3.

Many in the overflow crowd were miffed that they weren't given an opportunity to speak. The City Council's first promise before voting on the rezoning should be to let every citizen speak who wants to be heard. While reasonable to impose a time limit on each speaker, there should be no limit on the number of speakers. If that means council members bringing their sleeping bags to their Aug. 17 meeting, where a public hearing is planned, so be it. Better yet, the council should hold the hearing at a special meeting on a different date in order to ensure that every voice is heard. This is what you sign up for when you run for public office: listening to the citizens, giving careful thought to controversial matters, then voting your conscience. That process should never be rushed.

It's important to note that the current council and City Hall administration have a solid track record on economic development. News on Friday that Fitch, one of America's "Big Three" credit rating agencies, gave the city a maximum AAA rating on its 2022 general obligation bonds, in large part because of steadily growing revenue, was a reminder that Suffolk has pressed a lot of the right buttons economically. We tip our hats to those responsible.

That said, concerned citizens have raised legitimate questions about whether the warehousing and logistics sector, which has driven explosive commercial growth on the Route 58 corridor, is nearing the point of a negative return on investment. Perpetually clogged roads — which many transplants moved to Suffolk to get away from — will surely backfire, chasing residents further west to Franklin and Southampton or north to Isle of Wight. Getting around by car in Suffolk is no longer a pleasant experience. Some days, it feels a lot like Chesapeake and Virginia Beach.

Long before taking a vote on the project, the City Council should insist that staff make public and widely disseminate a detailed traffic study on the Port 460 project. If the one previously commissioned by the developer is deemed insufficient, a thorough study by an objective third-party consultant should be approved immediately.

In short, city officials haven't earned the citizenry's confidence on this project. They still have a chance to do so, but it won't happen with a rushed vote on Aug. 17.

Raise the bar economically

Another economic development “get” for Suffolk – a lawn and garden products plant announced, coincidentally, in the run-up to perhaps the most scrutinized vote Suffolk City Council members have or will ever cast – reminds us of the need for a new mindset in elected leadership.

That is, Suffolk has so much momentum economically that it can now afford to be picky about what projects it recruits, considers and lets happen. And it might just be time, as a community, to set our sights higher than warehousing and distribution.

Mayor Mike Duman and his council colleagues should take considerable pride in Suffolk’s enviable position. They

helped create it. There was a time, not so long ago, when the city and those responsible for its economic vitality couldn’t afford to be so choosy. Veteran job hunters like Kevin Hughes, the current deputy city manager, have slowly but surely transformed Suffolk from Hampton Roads’ neglected stepchild to a vibrant, progressive place where companies want to set up shop.

To be clear, the warehousing and distribution sector was a catalyst for the economic transformation, and elected and appointed leaders were wise to embrace it as a means to an end. The 18-wheeler frenzy on present-day Holland Road, especially after a current widening project is complete, strikes us as a tolerable annoyance to the extent that it jump-started a bigger and better economy. And no serious observer can quibble with the city’s hosting the massive Amazon hub that will open soon in North Suffolk. It is rare in the distribution sector as a major jobs creator.

But elected leadership now has an opportunity to focus on “better” jobs and flex the city’s muscle as a regional economic player. So, when the Port of Virginia and its emissaries, every time they need more warehouse space, tell Suffolk to jump, the response no longer has to be “how high?”

We’re not naïve about Suffolk’s reliance on a strong regional economy. Nor do we advocate an isolationist approach with our Hampton Roads neighbors. But Suffolk’s value in regional economic development should no longer be defined strictly by its vast farmland for future warehouses. In fact, what’s left of that farmland should be cherished, and sacrificed less often.

As City Council members look angry citizens in the face in coming days and cast their vote on the controversial Port 460 project, perceived duty to the region should not be their overriding consideration. Suffolk is on the verge of big things with or without Port 460. Elected leadership must embrace our city’s new prominence, lead with confidence and set a higher standard of excellence than warehouses and distribution centers.

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Port 460 puts city in a mood

It speaks to the collective funk of Suffolk's citizenry that the recent announcement by Lowe's Companies Inc. of plans to build a distribution center here and create 100 jobs was met not by jubilation, as it might once have been, but by a common sentiment:

More trucks.

The Suffolk City Council, an elected body that bears responsibility for the mood of the citizens it serves, has some work to do after its fateful, less-than-unanimous decision to bless a mammoth warehouse complex smack dab in the middle of town.

'A decade ago, we'd have been much more excited about the Lowe's announcement.'

The malaise started the night of the vote, when a room full of energetic, involved citizens filed out of City Hall with their heads hung in dejection. When the room was empty and only the TV cameras were rolling, the atmosphere remained funereal as the council members who approved the controversial project explained their votes in deflated, almost apologetic tones. If the project is all that city officials cracked it up to be, shouldn't its elected backers have been ecstatic?

Now comes news of litigation by citizens to try to stop the Port 460 project, ensuring many more months, if not years, of tension between the electorate and those they trusted to represent them. We don't blame the plaintiffs, but we're sad to see a proud, thriving city dragged down by the weight of a controversy that was completely unnecessary and avoidable.

The City Council has a chance, perhaps even an obligation, to lift the spirits of a downtrodden citizenry. Here's what we'd suggest:

▶ Host a series of town hall meetings and ask citizens what kind of economy they want. Every council member should attend and simply listen. Let the people talk.

▶ Take the will of the citizenry and give city staff, especially those in economic development, a deadline for a plan for a job recruitment and retention strategy that is consistent with what residents envision for Suffolk.

▶ Place at least a 12-month moratorium on new warehouses outside the city's existing logistical parks. Warehouses must become the lowest priority in Suffolk's plan for economic vitality.

For the record, we're pleased that Lowe's is investing in Suffolk. The new facility's location in the Virginia Port Logistics Park is appropriate and, unlike Port 460, won't make traffic congestion noticeably worse.

A decade ago, we'd have been much more excited about the Lowe's announcement. Now, our expectations are raised. Suffolk must quickly begin thinking bigger than warehouses. Citizens rightfully expect more for a city with such vast potential.