

The Salt Lake Tribune

George Pyle: Sadly, our editorial predicted what would happen with the Salt Lake City port



(Francisco Kjolseth | The Salt Lake Tribune) Mayor Jackie Biskupski holds a presser at the City County building on Tuesday, Feb. 27, 2018, to speak out against SB234 as written, which creates the Utah Inland Port Authority, saying it deprives the city of local control in taxing and land use decisions.



By George Pyle

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Did we call this? Or what?

In an editorial back on March 17, The Salt Lake Tribune noted that there was little reason to expect that anyone would correct the many flaws in a bill creating a new inland port authority to oversee development of a large chunk of northwest Salt Lake City. Even though Mayor Jackie Biskupski, Gov. Gary Herbert and the original sponsor of the bill, state Sen. Jerry Stevenson, all seemed to agree that the process was messed up.

That prediction was made because Hebert did exactly the wrong thing in signing a bill that even he said needed work. Once that was done, the amount of leverage the city and its allies would have in the negotiations to follow fell to absolutely zero. And the power of those who want the law to stay as-is became all but absolute.

And that's exactly what happened.

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As the bill careened through the 11th-hour mess that is normal for any session of the Utah Legislature, the port authority board to be created got more powerful and the city, less so.

The authority's share of the taxes that will be generated by the industrial and commercial development that everyone expects in the neighborhood of the Salt Lake International Airport and the new state prison grew until it swallowed up just about everything.

And that entity's ability to decide land use, the kinds of businesses that will be allowed and what substances they will be allowed to store and move swelled to the point that nobody was going to care what the city might think about air quality and other environmental concerns.

Herbert signed the bill and instantly suggested that interested parties start talking about how to make it better. When what he clearly should have done was to veto the measure and tell everyone to get together and come up with a better plan before he could even think of signing one.

When that didn't happen, the Tribune's editorial prediction came true. Dag nab it.

Herbert's people and some legislative leaders put together a new proposal, one that did not do nearly enough to satisfy the city's intertwined concerns of lost sovereignty and reduced revenue. So negotiations ended.

Maybe the two sides can come to a meeting of minds. But it seems pretty clear right now that those with all the power, those who passed the legislation, are keen to keep those green tree-huggers at City Hall out of the process altogether so they can turn a quarter of the city into a proto-Superfund site.

gpyle@sltrib.com

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