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Business leaders praise planned Salt Lake City trade hub but environmentalists raise questions



(Steve Griffin | Tribune file photo) The site of the former city landfill on the north side of I-80 between 5600 west and 7200 west in Salt Lake City Friday March 30, 2018. The proposed inland port project could be built on this site.

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Building a central shipping hub for international goods near the airport in Salt Lake City, known as the “inland port,” is an opportunity for this generation to contribute to the state’s legacy.

That’s the view of Natalie Gochnour, the director of the University of Utah’s Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, who spoke on a panel hosted by Envision Utah on Wednesday.

But a group of port-opponents, who protested that event, see the proposal as a massive source of pollution that was rammed through the Legislature.

Salt Lake City leaders remain frustrated that the new law creating the 38-square mile port near the Salt Lake City International Airport and soon-to-be-built state prison seized some land use authority. The Utah League of Cities & Towns called it “nothing short of a state takeover of a swath of Salt Lake City without the city’s consent.”

Envision Utah CEO Robert Grow, who moderated the discussion, acknowledged the governance question, what he called “the elephant in the room,” and asked panelists to respond. “I believe Salt Lake City is committed,” Derek Miller, the CEO of the Salt Lake City Chamber said, adding that Mayor Jackie Biskupski told him personally she was on board with the inland port project.

Moreover, Miller said he sees discussions about governance as being distractions from substantive debate about the logistics of an inland port. “What we’ve seen in the media, in my opinion, too often, is (coverage) about the politics of the inland port,” Miller told the attendees.

Gochnour equated the port’s potential to that of Hill Air Force Base, the Intermountain Power Plant and the 2002 Winter Olympics.

But some groups say the debate has avoided a number of concerns, among them air quality, wildlife protection, sustainability and conservation. What would a model inland port project look like? How about the worst-case scenario, and how would it be best avoided? What are the anticipated impacts on education, infrastructure and environment?

These are questions the Community Coalition for Port Reform, an alliance that held a small demonstration outside the Grand America Hotel shortly after the breakfast, felt went unanswered by the panel.

Westpointe Community Council Chairwoman Dorothy Owen said the proposed inland port would increase pollution as well as “volatile organic compounds and nitrogen oxides that form harmful ozone.” The Salt Lake City metro area was recently ranked the 18th most ozone-polluted city in the country.

“The air quality and other environmental health impacts will be felt most acutely by people in communities closest to the port,” Owen said, “all of whom have been disenfranchised by the Legislature’s creation of an unelected, and therefore potentially unaccountable, ‘port authority.’”

Hanko Kiessner, CEO of Packsize International, who spoke on the panel, said he envisions the inland port as being a “zero-emissions” project that utilizes green technology, including electric cranes for handling cargo and hybrid trucks for transport. “I think it can be done,” Kiessner told The Salt Lake Tribune. And therefore, he said, “I think it has to be done.”
