

Freight boss calls for Admiralty Island port expansion for Cairns

By Chris Calcino, The Cairns Post, 16 July 2018

THE boss of Australia's biggest privately-owned shipping company says Cairns has three options – expand the port, cap the population or let future generations starve.

Sea Swift CEO Fred White has outlined a proposal to transform Admiralty Island into Northern Australia's premier logistics hub, complete with road and rail access and a fuel tank farm removed from the mainland.

The idea has been bandied about for decades, only now undergoing a resurgence amid Trinity Inlet dredging's awaited start and predictions of the region's population doubling to 500,000 by 2050.

Mr White dared politicians to stake a claim for the future or watch jobs float away to centres willing to dream big.

“The hub incorporates a railhead, major road access realignment, laydown areas, and to remove the current constraints limiting existing port operations,” he said.

“Importantly, this concept provides certainty and optimism for current and prospective operators and users and will encourage private sector investment.



Sea Swift CEO Fred White has outlined a proposal to turn Admiralty Island into a new port precinct for Cairns called the Northern Australian Logistics Hub. PICTURE: CAIRNS POST
 “There are too many constraints in the current port land use configurations, which impact on efficiencies and increased costs.”

Port land is facing death by a thousand cuts, with concepts like the State Government’s global tourism hub casino-resort expected to remove another valuable bank of potential growth land. Even the approval for Hemingways Brewery to take over Wharf One raised questions over the State Government’s long-term vision for the port.

Mr White said the lack of an overarching strategic plan to 2050 meant piecemeal developments such as Mourilyan Harbour upgrades or shoe-horning cramped infrastructure into the existing Cairns port would occur sporadically.

Even then, the available land may have a rapidly approaching shelf life. Cairns only imports fertiliser and fuel by ship, but the scenario will be very different once this century is half exhausted.

Mr White said containerised imports would be necessary once the population reached a critical mass unable to be served solely by road.

Royal Australian Navy, Boarding Party personnel demonstrate a search on a simulated suspect vessel during the Live Exercise demonstration at the Proliferation Security Initiative, Exercise Pacific Protector, 17 held at HMAS Cairns on September 9.

Like Sea Swift, he said major freight firms like Toll and Linfox would want to invest in a state-of-the-art logistics hub on Admiralty Island.

“We’re not quite there yet, but that population is coming and it’s coming at a rate of knots,” he said.

“That’s why we need to start thinking about this and planning for it.”

Sea Swift faces a battle getting the proposal considered by government, with major environmental and cultural concerns about developing the island, particularly considering the volume of dredge spoil necessary to reclaim the land.

Mr White said he was ready for that conversation, noting Portsmouth was swampland until dredge spoil made it usable.

“You move it once and it’s future-proofed,” he said.

“It allows foreshore development, but more importantly it allows a working port future.

“We need to reinvest in Cairns and start treating this issue seriously as one of strategic importance to keep our operators here and to attract new ones.”

Enterprise North president Kevin Byrne. PICTURE: STEWART McLEAN

Byrne backs Sea Swift proposal

ENTERPRISE North has taken aboard Sea Swift’s proposed Northern Australia Logistics Hub as one of its key infrastructure policies.

The fledgling regional advocacy group’s president Kevin Byrne said the time was right to get Ports North, Cairns Regional Council and the State and Federal governments to the table.

He said the concept needed to be integrated into the council’s strategic plan, as well as “agile thinking and innovative funding” from all levels of government.

“Marine-based activities will play a decisive role in our future economic fortunes, providing for employment and domestic and international trading opportunities,” he said.

“We have oodles of land, deep water off Admiralty Island, and we are at the end of the northern rail line and the Pacific Highway.

“These are important strategic advantages and we need to capitalise on them.”

The possibility of moving HMAS Cairns was discussed but not deemed make-or-break, given existing operators’ shift would open up new Defence land in Portsmouth.

Representatives from all three tiers of government have received informal presentations on the proposal, along with several marine operators who have showed varying degrees of enthusiasm.

Mr Byrne said the next steps were to work through the details and arrive at a general agreement about progressing the various and staged components of the plan.

“We have the Northern Australia Infrastructure Facility here available to support these sorts of projects provided that there is the agreement between Federal and State governments,” he said.

“We create an additional industrial land bank, we relocate the fuel tanks farm to a new and more appropriate location on Admiralty Island, and free up and value-add land within the city in close proximity to the CBD.

“We can look at the growth of HMAS Cairns through a new set of eyes and provide some real impetus behind the mooted Cairns Marine Maintenance Precinct.

“What a wonderful opportunity now to do this.”

Cairns MP Michael Healy is not yet convinced Admiralty Island is the right solution.

PICTURE: BRENDAN RADKE.

Questions over the need

THE only way Cairns MP Michael Healy sees the Admiralty Island pitch gaining traction is if Defence opts to shift HMAS Cairns across the inlet.

“If the Federal Government wanted to build a Defence facility at Admiralty Island, then the Federal Government would have the legal right to do so,” he said.

That foray could set the ball rolling for further development, but Mr Healy (above) was not ready to back the proposal without proper scrutiny.

“I think it’s fabulous that we’ve got a significant marine operator in our area that thinks they should be expanding to other areas,” Mr Healy said.

“The authority that is charged with the ongoing development and future needs of our port is Ports North.

“Ports North is made up of a board of selected individuals, the majority of them have been influential locals.

“I would see it as their responsibility to project growth in that area and where we need to be by 2030 and 2050.”

Mayor Bob Manning says working port land should be sacrosanct. PICTURE: STEWART McLEAN

Inevitability slowly marches forward

MAYOR Bob Manning hoped developing the untouched island between Cairns and East Trinity will not be necessary, but said it may be inevitable if the working port keeps losing space to expand.

“When the City Port masterplan was passed by the Cabinet, it defined the boundary between the City Port and the working port,” he said.

“There was never to be any stepping over the line into the working port.

“You don’t build an airport and then use it as a parking lot.”

Cr Manning (left) said Cairns’s shipping potential was going backwards, despite multimillion-dollar promises of investment from governments.

“The port has probably the highest density of people of any part of the city,” he said.

“It (Ports North) is there to protect, preserve and provide for the future port needs of Cairns.

“It’s not there to shut these businesses out.

“That should be sacrosanct.”

Member for Leichardt Warren Entsch and Minister for Defence Marise Payne visits HMAS Cairns to speak about expansion plans to the Navy base. PICTURE: BRENDAN RADKE

Defending the port’s future

SHIFTING HMAS Cairns off the mainland has Leichhardt MP Warren Entsch’s wholehearted support – and he says the scheme is nothing new to Ports North.

“The Port Authority has already done a concept plan, and the base fits perfectly over there,” he said.

“The fact is, Defence has already committed close to \$750 million for upgrades over the next 10 years.

“I’ve already raised it as a prospect the Defence Department needs to look at.”

Mr Entsch (left) said a letter of support from the State Government would help shore up the proposal’s legitimacy in the Federal Government’s eyes.

“We could start looking at some sort of land exchange,” he said.

“They might be a bit nervous, but the State Government really needs to be on board with this, otherwise we’ll be going nowhere.”

The last of the Mt Emerald wind farm blades arrived at the Port of Cairns on December 19, 2017, in a shipment delivered from Houston in the United States. CREDIT: PORTS NORTH
Masterplan under review

PORTS North is due to create a new development masterplan over the coming 12 months.

“Since 2006, trade demand has been consistent with the masterplan, and the existing infrastructure does not constrain any of the port operations,” a spokeswoman said.

“As part of normal practice Ports North will be undertaking a review of the existing masterplan and developing a new masterplan for the future commencing during this financial year.”

The work will include “significant stakeholder and port user consultation”.

Norship Marine operating with all cylinders firing in February 2016 with maintenance, refits and restoration underway two Armidale Class patrol boats, one Cape Class patrol boat, one Pacific patrol boat, one Freemantle Class patrol boat, two Bay Class patrol boats and 30 commercial vessels (not all pictured). PICTURE: SUPPLIED

Comment: Time to knuckle down

THE term *lingchi* refers to the ancient Chinese “lingering death” torture and execution process, whereby tiny portions of a person’s body are gradually sliced away until the sweet release of death finally arrives.

Port land in Cairns is slowly but surely going the same way as those poor tormented souls – a finger lopped here for an admittedly lovely brewery, a big toe there for a “global tourism hub” casino.

We can survive on what we’ve got now, but eventually a critical mass will be reached where we need major port growth to allow imports as well as exports, just to keep us fed, clothed and employed.

Cairns has the biggest locally-based commercial marine fleet in the state with 1600 vessels – more than Brisbane’s 1200 and way above the 600 on Townsville’s books.

According to the 2016 census, it boasts the greatest employment in marine activities in Northern Australia, and the region’s population is also the fastest growing in the North.

Unless we take off the blinkers and look far ahead to 2050 and beyond, places like Darwin will catch us with our dacks down.

Turning Admiralty Island into a logistics hub may or may not be the answer, but it is at the very least a strong prospect that will become inevitable if this death by a thousand cuts is allowed to continue.

The benefits are obvious, but the cultural and environmental concerns cannot be ignored and will be a bloody minefield to negotiate.

Leases on the fuel farms in Portsmith start expiring from 2024, and the Federal Government is talking about spending \$750 million over a decade on the marine industry with little detail on where it will go.

It’s time to start the discussion.

Chris Calcino

chris.calcino@news.com.au