

Op-ed: Sitting out on inland port negotiations wasn't an option

The Salt Lake City Council

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In our time on the Salt Lake City Council, Salt Lake City and Utah state leadership have had quite the run. Among Operation Rio Grande, planning for new homeless resource centers, the state prison relocation and funding for affordable housing, we've gone the rounds.

But the process for this latest joint venture to create an inland port — a potential economic boon for both the city and state — in our valuable west side has created a new era of collaboration and cooperation.

The city has been working with the community for years to facilitate development of the northwest quadrant. Our planning division, economic development department, Redevelopment Agency and so many other departments laid the groundwork to convert an area rich with potential into a center for global trade while protecting the area's unique open space.

But in March, the Legislature adopted a version of Senate Bill 234, creating a state-led inland port in Salt Lake City that was inconsistent with the conversations the city shared with the state to that point. After the session, communication broke down and negotiations failed.

With the concerns of our constituents driving us forward, however, and an invitation from Speaker Greg Hughes and Sen. Jim Dabakis, the council made it back to the negotiating table with the Legislature and governor. We talked. We debated and collaborated. We shared data and staff cellphone numbers.

And we're so glad we were there, because it became clear there was a very small window of time to effect change on the state's plans for the inland port. The train was essentially leaving the station, and if no city elected leaders jumped on, we would miss our chance.

In truth, some of the biggest obstacles in the process came from our own mayor, who refused to participate and even instructed city employees not to answer our questions.

That's why, even though it's a vast improvement, we know the new bill isn't perfect. We weren't able to consult the city's valuable experts for review and advice on planning, financial or economic development details. We've gained confidence in the process with legislative leaders and the governor, however, that the legislation will be further improved over time.

We helped create a draft bill that, if adopted by the state Legislature during Wednesday's special session, puts the governing board on a path of transparency and accountability by requiring:



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- A written sustainability plan that will ensure responsible environmental practices are embedded in the port's operations and practices from day one.
- A written business plan.
- Wetlands to be removed from the port boundaries.
- Ten percent of property tax increment to be dedicated to affordable housing.
- Governing board members and staff members to meet the state's ethics and other standards.
- Cities in the port jurisdiction to be compensated for the fire, police and other services they provide.
- The ability for affected individuals other than property owners to appeal decisions.
- Clear procedures for the appeal process.
- Written appeals and decisions within specific time frames with public input during the appeals process.

We're thankful to state leaders for the opportunity to share concerns and represent the interests of all city residents and taxpayers. It's our sincere hope that the mayor will engage and allow staff to help identify the next round of enhancements that will protect the environment and facilitate an orderly and profitable inland port process. We'll have a much better inland port law as a result.

Both branches of Salt Lake City government care deeply about the inland port. But as the state ramped up its efforts to develop this critical area of our city — with or without our input — we were faced with a stark choice: stay out of it entirely because the process and decisions weren't exactly what we prescribed, or get involved to make improvements where we could.

Rather than hoping for changes to materialize in next year's legislative session, we talked with our constituents, heard that action was needed and chose to get to work.