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Newsmakers

Promet leads fight to keep industry on the Providence waterfront

By Natalie Myers
PBN Staff Writer

During the past five years, David and Joel Cohen have doubled Promet Marine Services' sales and work force. They have re-invented the family business from a scrap metal company into a ship repair and maintenance business.

Today they are facing a different challenge: impending waterfront development led by developer Patrick Conley and proposed zoning changes they fear will drive them out of business. Providence's new Comprehensive Plan, already approved by the City Council's Ordinance Committee, is set to go before the full council on Nov. 1.

Through the new Providence Working Waterfront Alliance, Promet is trying to prevent the rezoning and highlight the value of industry.

PBN: Are you afraid that if waterfront zoning along Allens Avenue becomes mixed use, that you are going to be pushed out?

JOEL COHEN: We honestly believe that the city wants to push us out of business, despite what they say. We're fighting it, and we're hoping that we'll have positive results. We just can't stop doing business. We have a very important niche ... in the Northeast. There's really no other facility like ours. ... And our employees are behind us. ... They like what they see, that the owners are fighting to preserve their jobs.

PBN: Do you think the businesses can coexist with development?

JOEL COHEN: It depends what kind of development. There has to be a buffer.

PBN: You believe these [industrial] businesses are the best use for this waterfront?

JOEL COHEN: Absolutely. You have home heating fuel at Sprague and heavy oil. ... They supply the hospitals, the universities. They supply probably 50 percent of the state of Rhode Island's heating oil. ... Narragansett Improvement, the asphalt plant, this is his market. He's been here for 115 years. Why should he change? Sprague has been here for 100 years. ... Where else are we going to be? We have to be on deep water.

PBN: Is there no place you could relocate?

JOEL COHEN: There's no other place, despite what some people suggest. There's no room at the municipal pier for any of our businesses to relocate. Plus it would be exorbitantly expensive. [Cohen estimates it would cost at least \$100 million to move.]

PBN: What would happen if Promet and the other businesses on the waterfront shut down?

JOEL COHEN: It would be a tough niche to fill. Our fishing boat customers, they'd be at a loss. They'd have to go to Canada. There are repair yards up in Halifax. ... Our main competition is, there's some work done in New Bedford. But they don't have the capacity to take on the volume of business.

DAVID COHEN: We are the last commercial shipyard in the Ocean State ... We do almost 300 liftings per year.

PBN: Patrick Conley has said he thinks the businesses and development on the waterfront could coexist if you complied with state and federal environmental regulations. What is your response?

JOEL COHEN: We are in compliance with all state and federal regulations. We have no citations on record. We are very careful to be a good neighbor. It's always a requirement for us ... to be in compliance. It is a noisy business. It is a bit of a dirty business. And we have a full-time safety and environmental person on the payroll. That's all he does.

PBN: What are your thoughts on the argument that redeveloping the waterfront would increase the tax base?

JOEL COHEN: There have been studies that show that it is more valuable to the community to have a working waterfront than to have a tax base. There are jobs, people spending money in the community, paying taxes within the community. ... The economic benefit lasts as long as the residential property is being built. After that, you've got \$8.50-an-hour jobs as opposed to \$20-an-hour jobs.

PBN: Do you think the city should do more to attract industrial businesses to the waterfront? Do you feel your company could expand?

DAVID COHEN: If we were encouraged, there's more growth for our business.

JOEL COHEN: The point is that there has been a cloud over the working waterfront since Mayor Cianci started the Three Cities Plan. And it has hampered any industrial investment. We ... spent \$2.5 million [recently investing in Promet] because at that time we thought the administration was in favor of supporting the working waterfront. ... We are very reluctant to spend any additional money unless we get some encouragement.

PBN: What is the next step for the Providence Working Waterfront Alliance?

JOEL COHEN: It's just keeping on top of the situation to try and encourage the City Council and primarily the Planning Commission to do the right thing. We have a sense that people are listening to us. And we've just got to keep our message out there. ... We're not asking for tax breaks. We're not asking for subsidy. We're not asking for a special privilege. We're just asking to be allowed to do what we have done. We pay substantial taxes ... for the city besides the state taxes and federal taxes ... We have a \$5 million payroll.

DAVID COHEN: I know between [Promet], [Walco Electric] and Narragansett Improvement there's \$25 million of payroll. If you add the truck drivers, the employees of Sprague and the other industries ... and taking the multiplier effect into account, there's got to be in excess of \$100 million in payroll that comes off Allens Avenue. •

Interview: David Cohen
Position: President, Promet Marine Services

Background: Cohen started working for his family's scrap iron and metal business on Providence's waterfront after graduating from college in the 1960s. He was a lieutenant in the U.S. Coast Guard reserves for nine years. He and his brother, Joel, co-founded Promet Marine Services in 1974.

Education: B.S. in business administration, 1962, Suffolk University
Residence: Providence
Age: 68

Joel Cohen
Position: Vice president, Promet Marine Services; president, Providence Working Waterfront Alliance

Background: Cohen also similar to his brother, started in the family scrap iron and metal business after college. Before they started Promet, they were laborers, then salesmen in scrap iron and metal.

Education: B.A. in economics, 1957, Harvard University
Residence: Providence
Age: 71