

**Testimony of Thomas Valleau
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**Before the Providence Ordinance Committee Public Hearing on Proposed Changes to the
Comprehensive Plan**

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My name is Thomas Valleau, and I am the Executive Director of the North Atlantic Ports Association, which is an association of the commercial seaports between Virginia and Nova Scotia with approximately 100 members.

Providence is a beautiful city, a city where so many things have been done right, a center of commerce and finance, a leader in urban design, and an intellectual center. It's always a pleasure to experience the City of Providence.

Now you are engaged in a civic debate about the role of the working waterfront and its part in the economic story and economic success that citizens here benefit from. This debate has many aspects.

What industrial operations are located at the water's edge? Why did they locate there? How does ocean transportation work? What are the cargoes? Where do they come from? Who are the customers? Who are the beneficiaries? Who owns these facilities? Who are the employees and how many?

What is the true value of the waterfront?

This is a familiar debate to us. Most of the port communities in the northeast have dealt with this issue in some fashion: Norfolk, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, New Haven, Boston and even Portland, Maine, my home town. Is there a place for mixed use on the waterfront? Should water-dependent uses be protected? Or displaced?

Back in the 1980s, this issue took center stage in Portland, creating a political, media, and economic debate of huge proportions that went on for three turbulent years. Developers had proposed, and in fact built, luxury condominiums in the center of Portland's working harbor, in the midst of cargo ships, fishing boats, oil tankers and ocean-going ferries.

The debate that this unleashed, and which resulted in a voter referendum to protect the working waterfront, went beyond economics: it went to the history, the culture and the identity of the Portland itself. People believed that once condominium development began it would spread, propelled by short-term real estate economics, and that once the deep water terminals and the distant water fishing boats were squeezed out, they would be lost, if not forever then at least for the lifetime of those present.

I was the port director in Portland at the time. We had invested tens of millions in port infrastructure but now, with the arrival of the condominiums, our investment – the communities investment -- was at risk.

Election day came, the ballots were counted, and with the clear support of the voters mixed use development was rejected. Ever-resilient, the condominium and office developers built their projects nearby and the result has been the best of both worlds, a vibrant working waterfront adjacent to a textured and colorful mixed use district.

Each community must find its own way forward. The Portland story will not become the Providence story. How should the issue be framed?

Providence is one of perhaps six New England cities that can claim to be a true, deep-water seaport. This is a city with the best in rail transportation, air service, and highways. When the port facilities are taken into account, Providence is among the elite in its range of transportation services.

The port is your link to the global economy, a rapidly expanding economy in which ninety percent of all goods move by sea in the daily, worldwide flow of ocean commerce. Your 40 foot deep shipping channel is a rare and valuable maritime asset but, unfortunately, it's invisible to ordinary citizens. Yet steamship agencies and agents worldwide know about it and take it into account in their logistical planning.

Providence as a seaport is different from Norfolk, New York or Long Beach. Cargoes that use the Port of Providence originate here or are consumed here. In your commitment to the port, you're bootstrapping your own economy. When you leave this hearing and start your automobile engines, ask yourselves where the gasoline comes from.

Communities make comprehensive plans and adopt zoning ordinances for the fundamental reason that some land uses are simply incompatible with others. From my experience I would say it is difficult to get people to understand and acknowledge these issues of incompatibility before the damage is done. Act in haste; repent at leisure.

Is it a good idea to build condominiums right next door to cargo terminals? What about noise? What about lighting? Trucks? Cranes? Loudhailers? Developers see these issues as short-term and legalistic. The condominium residents will be thinking longer term.

Developers think of the waterfront as scenery. To us in the business of ports and port economics, it's the end point in a global transportation network -- a web of routes criss-crossing the world's oceans at a time of international trade like no other in history.

Where does Providence's economic future lie? The answer to that question is central to tonight's discussion. One path leads toward housing construction, restaurants and office buildings. The other leads toward international trade. Does Providence need to accept an either/or plan?

Or can you have the best of both?