WHATEVER HAPPENED TO PORT SAN JOSE?

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The insignificance of San Francisco Bay to the economy of Santa Clara Valley, California was described by Jan Broek in his classic historical-geographic study of the valley:

As a traffic medium, the Bay means at present nothing to the Valley. Where once ships came up to the landings one finds but shallow, mudfilled channels; the harbor of Alviso, once the main port of the Valley, now only serves as a yachting harbor and for this it is hardly deep enough... At present the Bay forms a swampy back wash, not a door to the world's commerce.1

Broek's summation is as correct today as it was when the passage was penned in 1932.

It seems rather incongruent that such a potentially profitable geographic endowment should not have been fully exploited. Certainly prior to the Second World War, when the production of agricultural commodities, especially fruits, earned the valley the title of "fruit bowl of America", the benefits of a port on the bay would have been incalculable. Even now, the bucolic days swept away by the tide of urban and industrial expansion which has engulfed the valley, the potential economic advantages of a deep-water port remain great.

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Not surprisingly, the benefits of a deep-water port in the south bay region have not remained unnoticed, nor have plans to develop a port gone unpursued. This short paper chronicles the history of an on-again, off-again project spanning four decades, from the 1920's to the 1960's, to develop a "Port San Jose" at the harbor of Alviso.

The Harbor of Alviso

The dreams of a deep-water port in the south bay have focused on Alviso harbor, situated where the meandering Guadalupe River debouches into the bay via Alviso Slough, about eight miles northeast of the city of San Jose (see Figure 1). Although the small town of Alviso is now run-down providing minimal contemporary anchorage and shelter only for small pleasure craft, such has not always been the case.

Indeed, from the beginning of Spanish settlement in the region in the late eighteenth century, Alviso—known prior to 1849 as the Embarcadero de Santa Clara—was a port of regional stature. Through the port moved the supplies and pioneers which helped nurture and populate the pueblo of San Jose and missions Santa Clara and San Jose. During the Mexican and American periods, after 1820, exports of hides and tallow, lumber, quicksilver, and agricultural products funneled through the port, increasing its significance as a trans-shipment point and entrepot. The town of Alviso, founded in 1849 and incorporated in 1852, languished following completion of the San Francisco-San Jose Railroad in 1864, which bypassed Alviso, its three wharfs and six major warehouses remained busy and viable throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. One publication of 1896, for example, proclaimed that "Alviso is the country's greatest port, and is destined to become a shipping center." Unfortunately, around the turn of the century accelerated
Figure 1. South San Francisco Bay Region.
siltation of the slough, decreased outflow from the Guadalupe River, and increasing sizes of commercial vessels signaled an end to commercial shipping at Alviso.

In 1907, however, the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors surmised: "With a few thousand dollars appropriation, Alviso harbor ... can be made a deep-water harbor, available for the largest ships." Only four years later, when the harbor was of little or no commercial value, a promotional publication of the San Jose Chamber of Commerce failed to even mention the harbor and characterized Alviso as merely a "pretty village". Realizing the potential importance of the harbor, in 1913 the city of San Jose, in its first major annexation, annexed an eight-mile strip of property along the highway out to the bay.

Port San Jose

In spite of the annexation move, no decisive action was taken to develop the harbor until 1928. In that year members of the San Jose Real Estate Board, under the leadership of Wilbur F. Henning, formed the San Jose Port Association. Their intention was to establish a deep-water port at Alviso, to be called Port San Jose. Their first move in this direction was to retain an engineer from San Francisco to conduct a feasibility study. The findings of the study estimated that the port would cost $2,708,650 to build and $400,000 annually to operate, but would be able to handle annual tonnage of 1,227,651. Thus Santa Clara Valley shippers would be saved an estimated $1,677,591 in freight rates each year.

The association realized that governmental assistance was needed in undertaking such a costly endeavor. After the association explained and promoted the plan in initial correspondence with the federal government, the government expressed interest in the proposed project. Subsequently,
a team from the Army Corps of Engineers was dispatched to Alviso to conduct their own feasibility study. The Army engineers approved the project, and recommended governmental expenditures of some $300,000. Their recommended plan for the development of the harbor called for widening of Alviso Slough to 300 feet and dredging to a depth of 27 feet; extending from a point about a mile southeast of Dumbarton Point to the mouth of the Guadalupe River; with a turning basin 600 feet wide, 1,200 feet long and 30 feet deep at the lower end of the channel. It was further suggested that the dredged material be used to reclaim marshland on which a highway, a broad-gauge railroad, and commercial activities could be located.

On August 30, 1935, Congress approved the River and Harbor Act, which was signed by President Roosevelt on September 1, 1935. The Act provided $300,000 for the project on a joint federal-local basis. Local interests had to meet the following stipulations: (1) contribute $260,000 for construction costs; (2) provide public wharf facilities sufficient in size to handle 400,000 tons annually, and also provide rail and truck facilities to handle that amount of tonnage (the estimated cost for the construction of these facilities was about $2,200,000); (3) provide suitable disposal areas during construction and for subsequent maintenance.

The next step for local authorities was to elect a board of directors to oversee the project. Once that task was dispensed with, a port district had to be delimited. But in the matter of district boundaries the problems began. At first a district was proposed that would extend up the peninsula as far as Palo Alto. The Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors summarily rejected this proposal and refused to call an election to settle the matter. The San Jose Chamber of Commerce then took over the districting
dispute. They championed the formation of a much smaller
district that would favor the city of San Jose, but still
be under county jurisdiction. The results of an election
held to establish the proposed smaller district were 4,404
in favor and 3,992 against. The matter was far from being
settled, however. Subsequent to the election, legal action
was initiated to declare the election void, and in June
1936 the Superior Court dissolved the district on technical
grounds.

In spite of this setback, the city of San Jose
refused to let the project die. It was decided that the
city should sponsor bonds for the project totaling $1,250,000
but there were numerous delays and the bond issue was never
actually put before the voters. Waterfront labor disputes
in San Francisco were blamed for causing the delay. It was
also felt by many people that the entire project was a plot
by real estate interests to make money, reminiscent of the
scandalous "New Chicago" land speculation promotion scheme
in Alviso which had shocked the community in the early
1890's. The final blow came when the city was notified by
the federal government that it would have to underwrite the
entire cost of the project to guarantee completion, and thus
qualify for federal funds. In May of 1939, the San Jose
City Council announced that there was "insufficient interest"
in the project, and the subject was dropped.

Interest in the project momentarily surfaced again
in 1942 when the Permanente Cement Company of San Jose
began production of millions of pounds of cement for export.
But, escalation of World War II stifled the project at an
early stage of planning. Again, in 1953, the San Jose
Chamber of Commerce renewed efforts to make their dream
project a reality. A 100-foot pier was built to import
gasoline for nearby Moffett Field, and a sign was actually
posted on the mudflats that read, "Welcome to Port San Jose."
To commemorate these developments, a bottle of prune juice was smashed triumphantly at the end of the pier. After these not-too-epic events, the project once again failed to materialize.

By 1959, the never-say-die San Jose Chamber of Commerce had marshalled together a barrage of statistics and persuasive arguments to show the feasibility and profitability of the elusive project. This time opposition surfaced in the form of the Oakland Port Authority who, for obvious reasons, opposed the project. Action was delayed for five years. Finally, in 1964, the Army Corps of Engineers released a follow-up report which concluded that construction of the facility would cost an estimated $19,871,000 and would need primary cargoes of $1 million in annual revenue to justify such a large expenditure--well above the estimated annual revenue of $240,000 projected for such a facility.

At last, it seemed, the project was put to rest. But such is not the case. In 1973, subsequent to the city of Alviso's consolidation with San Jose in 1968, the city manager of San Jose noted that San Jose accepted the consolidation with Alviso, in part, for "... the protection of the proposed development of a deep water port facility." The dream of a Port San Jose lives on.

NOTES


3 Carrie Steven-Walter, "In California's Garden," Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors, 1907, p. 9.

4 San Jose Chamber of Commerce, "Santa Clara County, California," 1911, p. 61.


7 Goodman, op. cit.


10 Goodman, op. cit.

11 Ludlow, op. cit.
