



How Ports and the Port of Port Angeles Were Created

By Laurel Black of Laurel Black Design for the spring 2015 Port Pilot

Public ports came into being in Washington State in the early 20th century. They were created as a response to the growing control of harbors and waterfronts by privately-owned companies such as railroads and steamship companies. The value of access to port facilities and infrastructure increased with the expansion of trade during the Industrial Revolution. Public sentiment gradually turned in favor of publicly available harbors and waterfronts, especially in Washington State, which is more dependent on external trade than other states, and where most of the principal cities are water-based ports.

It also became apparent that infrastructure coordination and economies of scale were nearly impossible when waterfronts were divided into competing narrowly focused interests unconcerned with promoting trade for the benefit of the whole community.

The creation of public ports was advocated largely by civil engineers and planners who asserted that necessary development and modernization would only go forward if harbor areas were in public ownership. The railroads resisted the loss of their control, but in 1911, Washington's Port District Act was signed into law.

Through directly elected commissioners, ports were given the power to "acquire, construct and operate waterways, docks, wharves and other harbor improvements."¹ Ports were designated as independent of other governing bodies, such as counties, and could levy taxes, issue bonds, acquire property, set rates and lease port-owned property. This basic structure is still in place today.

Ports are designed to function both as governments and as entrepreneurial bodies. They are able to put public money to use for the public good by creating the infrastructure that businesses need to survive and grow, but could not afford to build using only their own resources.

Through direct election of commissioners, port district voters have the ability to help set the direction and policies of their ports.

The Port of Port Angeles, which is all of Clallam County, was created by county voters in 1922 by a nearly two-to-one margin. It is one of Washington's eleven deep-water ports, out of a total of 75 ports statewide, and is the only one on the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Like all Washington ports, it is charged with promoting and enhancing a healthy economy in its district through business development and job creation.

From the Port's website: *"The port engages in four lines of business: marine facilities, marinas, airports, and industrial properties. These businesses include four marine terminals, two airports, two marinas, three industrial business parks, and several other industrial and commercial properties. In addition to its business responsibilities, the port also plays an important role in the redevelopment of industrial properties county-wide.*

"Historically, the port provided facilities for handling logs transported from the Olympic Peninsula to Puget Sound, along the West Coast and for export to Pacific Rim countries. In recent years, the port has modernized its facilities and expanded its marine terminal services to handle a broad mix of bulk, break-bulk and containerized cargoes."

Today, the Port of Port Angeles continues its mission to build the county's economy through "strategic investments in its facilities, partnering with public and private entities to reposition and revitalize key properties, and identifying emerging markets and new business opportunities that create community value and facilitate new job development."²

1. *Public Ports in Washington: The First Century 1911-2011*, by Kit Oldham and the HistoryLink Staff. ©The Washington Public Ports Association.