

## Should we consolidate our ports?

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Harris County Judge Ed Emmett dropped in to visit with the Chronicle editorial board this past week. Ever the thoughtful Rice grad, Emmett is a big picture guy by inclination, and since he's not in a political campaign this election season, he has the luxury of thinking about the big picture for Houston, Harris County and the Gulf Coast region.

With his extensive transit background Emmett has plenty to say about commuter rail and Metro's strategy to promote greater regional mobility. A major challenge to that mobility is the fact that the largest population growth in Harris County is occurring outside the 610 Loop. But we'll leave that to the judge to set out in his own words perhaps in an op-ed piece.

We came away from our hour or so with Emmett most intrigued by his ideas about the future direction of the Port of Houston.

Much of the excitement at the port these days centers on the upcoming expansion of the Panama Canal and what that will bring to the Port of Houston. Emmett's something of a contrarian on this topic. Yes, the widening of the Panama Canal will be important, but not as much as people think, he says. That's because transiting through the canal to Houston rather than off-loading at the port of Long Beach, Calif., will add 18 days of transit time for shippers from the Pacific. In that time, Emmett says, they can have their goods unloaded in California and shipped by rail or truck to most anywhere in the country.

"We're going to get a little business" from the Panama Canal widening, "but not much," Emmett says, reckoning, the port ought to be focused more on growing trade from India, Africa and South America that arrives here from the Atlantic. "We're perfectly positioned," Emmett says.

Which leads him to a provocative policy question: "Why do we have a Port of Houston, a Port of Galveston, a Port of Texas City and a Port of Freeport? Why not a regional port?"

Interesting question. It would seem to us that the duplication of bureaucracies and facilities that is presently the case with these ports operating as separate entities would offer an opportunity to save money for taxpayers and increase efficiency to boot.

Incorporating Freeport under an umbrella entity would help solve one large headache for the Port of Houston: the ongoing expense of dredging and the stubborn unwillingness of the federal government to contribute back a respectable fraction of what the port sends to Washington specifically for dredging. As Emmett points out, Freeport doesn't need to be dredged because it sits right on the Gulf.



This is a conversation that should continue. We'll move it along by echoing Emmett's query: Why no truly regional port?

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