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State report calls for Port of Houston reforms

Posted: August 6, 2012 - 12:10am

By AP

HOUSTON (AP) — The Port of Houston needs to make sweeping changes to its management style and modernize its business practices as it seeks to keep up with growing demand in a rapidly expanding market, according to a report released by a state advisory commission.

The Sunset Advisory Commission made more than 12 recommendations in the 95-page report it released Friday, the Houston Chronicle reported, including limiting commissioners to three, four-year terms and becoming more transparent.

The Port of Houston is one of the nation's busiest, responsible for overseeing ship traffic to dozens of refineries and petrochemical plants housed along the Houston Ship Channel. It is expected to grow as the region's population grows, the petrochemical industry expands and the Panama Canal is upgraded. At the same time, the commission found there would be scarce federal funds for maintenance of the ship channel, and the port would have to find funds beyond the taxpayer bonds it has relied on to keep up with demand.

But despite the broad reforms called for in the report, the commission concluded the port could be fixed.

"The Port of Houston Authority is not a broken organization, despite the image that may appear through the harsh glare of the media spotlight or a cursory reading of this report's findings," the report stated. "The negative attention and resulting Sunset review were a wake-up call for the authority. It has work to do to restore public trust and respond creatively to the challenges ahead."

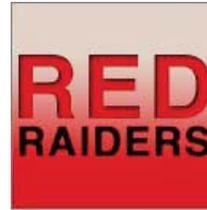
The review resulted from criticism that the port held too many closed-door meetings, overspent and had insufficient financial controls. The port has until Aug. 17 to respond to the report.

In addition to calling for term limits for commissioners, the report also recommends that one of the commissioners be appointed by the governor. Currently, the nearby counties and cities have representatives that oversee the authority.

"We need new people on the Port Commission," Harris County Commissioner Steve Radack said. "It's a report that obviously points out some very serious problems

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that should have been dealt with years ago.”

Len Waterworth, the port’s new executive director, said the recommendations “match up very well with the observations I’ve made over the past six months.”

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