

Port plan addresses never-ending 'tension' between industry, planners

By [Brady Slater](#) on Feb 19, 2017 at 9:00 p.m.



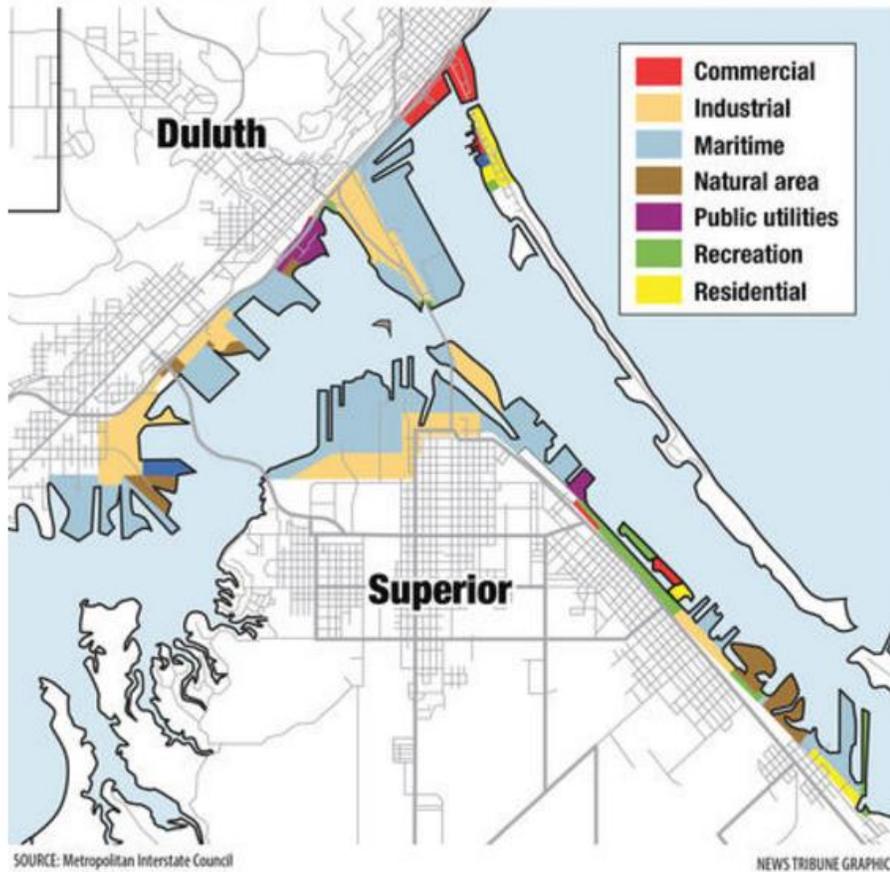
This aerial view of Rice's Point illustrates the concentration of maritime and industrial activities in the harbor. A new long-range plan released in December seeks to protect the working aspects of the Duluth-Superior Harbor. Bob King / rking@duluthnews.com

A plan adopted late last year prioritizes the protection of the Duluth-Superior port from developments that encroach on the working aspects of the harbor.

The plan is dubbed the Duluth-Superior Port Land Use Plan and was developed by the Metropolitan Interstate Council, which put forth its first such plan in 1978.

Now almost 40 years later, the update that comes roughly every 10 years continues to press the importance of preserving the maritime and industrial aspects of the port.

Future land use



"We feel it's important, because once land gets converted away from maritime use it won't come back," said Deb DeLuca, government and environmental affairs director for the Duluth Seaway Port Authority, which is one of more than two dozen entities on the Harbor Technical Advisory Committee that adopted the plan in December.

First reported in the Superior Telegram, the plan features 26

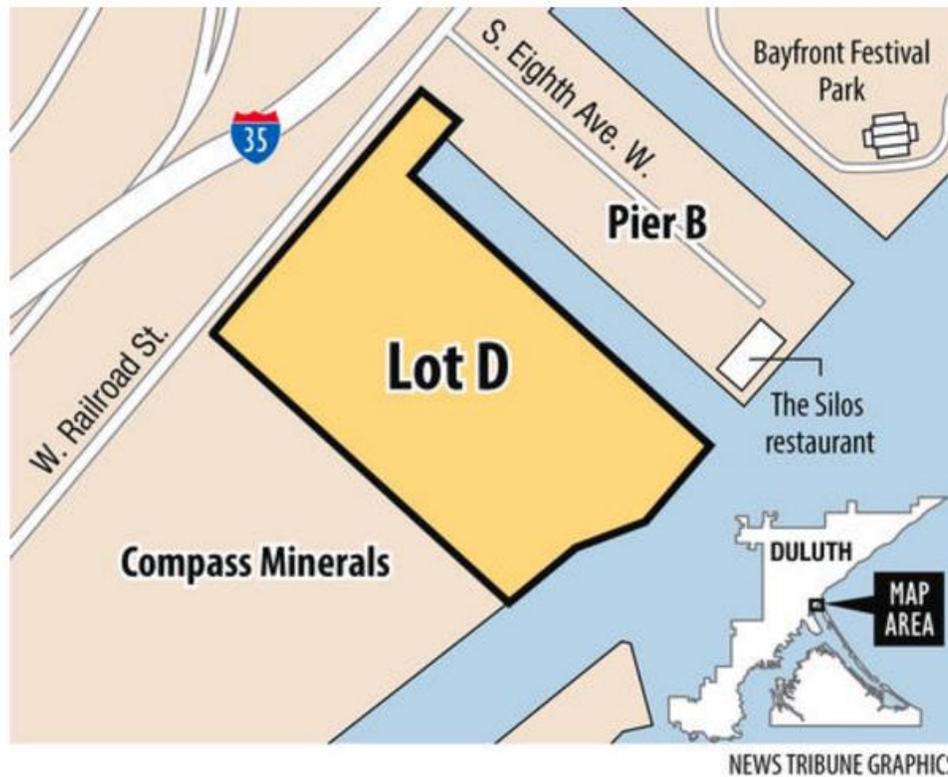
recommendations but none more prominent than the first, which recites a protection mantra that appears throughout the nearly 50-page report.

An advisory document, the recommendations are not binding. But the plan has historically seen its contents widely adopted in the broader comprehensive plans of both Twin Ports cities.

"Any port area has to decide how much land area do they consider as industrial because it's adjacent to an asset, which is the deep-water port," said Ron Chicka, director of the Metropolitan Interstate Council, which receives federal money to bring together people from across jurisdictions to plan solutions to the transportation issues that affect local communities.

Port towns that cede too much of their industrial or maritime land risk stunting economic growth, sources explained, warning that as appealing as the waterfront can be for tourism, there is a calculable cost to overdoing it.

In Duluth, "industrial jobs represent a \$53,000/year wage compared to stepping stone jobs in food and hospitality of \$17,000 (per year)," DeLuca said. "The nice thing about the transportation sector is that for some jobs there's a lower barrier for entry to those higher wages."



While describing city leaders as "very respectful of the port," DeLuca acknowledged a constant "tension between commercial and industrial" uses for the waterfront. That was evident in 2016, when commercial development on the waterfront took center stage. Pier B Resort opened in Duluth on

former industrial dock space and the city later fielded commercial proposals for the future development of the neighboring Lot D.

City leaders have gone on record to say that Lot D is essentially the demarcation line for commercial development along that sector of the U.S. Interstate 35 industrial corridor that features the docks on Rice's Point and more. Adam Fulton, manager of the city's community planning division, balked at the notion of any existing tension, saying that the myriad planners, developers and others involved are in agreement when it comes to port preservation. He noted that in 2006 the city adopted, as a guiding principle, that it would continue to be supportive of its traditional economic base.

"It's a great privilege to have a working port and a huge benefit," Fulton said. "We want to be as supportive as we can."

Fulton described a photo in his office from the 1880s that features sailing ships carrying bulk goods in and out of the local port. Fast-forward to today and the forecast is for freight movement to increase nationally by 45 percent by 2045, DeLuca said.

"That represents opportunities with maritime shipping being such an efficient way to move freight," she said.

With increased rail capacity in the port from recent expansion and the prospect of friendlier truck access into and out of the port should planned I-35 reconstruction take place, the moving parts in a constantly evolving port are suggestive of an advancing port and not a retracting one.

The port plan's value comes, in part, from reinforcing that point.

"We're trying to advocate for the highest and best use of the area," Chicka said, "and that would be an industrial base."