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Port operator opposes Spoilbank marina project

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Hedland's port operator fears a future Spoilbank marina would not only launch small boats too close to its shipping channel but agrees with miner BHP Billiton the development could impact nearby heavy industry.

As operator of the world's largest bulk export port, Pilbara Ports Authority chief executive Roger Johnston outlined his opposition to the marina in a February letter seen by the Telegraph.

Addressing LandCorp and Town of Port Hedland chief executives, Frank Marra and Mal Osborne, Mr Johnston said the future marina could launch 400 small boats per day into waters just 600m from a critical bend in the port's shipping channel.

He said this shipping zone presented the greatest navigational challenge to large vessels entering and exiting the port, a hazard that would be greatly increased should small craft interfere or become stranded in these waters.

He also said the Spoilbank's community spaces and cafe developments would be too close to the port, potentially restricting its future profits.

"While it was not the board's main focus, we note and agree the position of BHP Billiton that the marina is likely to exacerbate incompatible uses of land, occasioned by the dust from ore loading operations," Mr Johnston said.

"Further, it is not known what other industries may wish to use Port Hedland in the future and, for that reason too, PPA would not willingly foreclose commercial opportunities by creating the possibility of incompatible land uses."

The PPA and BHP's objections come as significant obstacles for government planners as they push ahead with the multimillion-dollar Spoilbank waterfront project.

The development is expected to include a marina, cafes, open spaces and an arts precinct.

But LandCorp must first present a compelling business case to State Cabinet if it is to convince them to release the \$112 million in funding they have earmarked for the project.

At February's Hedland council meeting, deputy mayor Camilo Blanco described the Spoilbank marina as a game-changer that would help Hedland's economy diversify into tourism and small-scale commercial boating industries.

However, he accused the PPA and BHP of using their influence to put big business interests ahead of the community's.

"We have bent over backwards to please the port and the objecting iron ore exporter," he said.

"We have removed the residential component on the Spoilbank ... scaled down the project size, looked at the stupid Cooke Point (alternative site), produced report after report and jumped through hoop after hoop.

"But all this community gets is opposition from the same port and miner."

Despite this opposition, Town acting chief executive Chris Linnell said he believed "working with our project partners and key stakeholders" would lead to the successful completion of the waterfront development.

A PPA spokeswoman said the government body was committed to supporting Hedland's community through a local employment model and support for environmental initiatives, such as the Hedland's turtle monitoring program.

The PPA also contributed \$254,000 towards community initiatives in 2014-15, she said.

BHP did not comment but referred to a May 2015 letter by its iron ore head of corporate affairs Mark Donovan.

In it, Mr Donovan said BHP would cease advocating against the Spoilbank development if it did not include residential buildings and if proper planning controls were placed across future development in Hedland's West End.