

## Op-Ed

# Our community's future — our choice

In reading the numerous articles about Maersk Line's decision to leave the Port of Charleston, I was compelled to share some important principles I learned about eight years ago when I



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moved from my hometown of Charleston to a very different community in our country, Minneapolis. These principles have shifted the way I view and manage complex issues such as the current Maersk situation.

Two decades ago, I served as the local government liaison for S.C. Electric & Gas Co. Here, I experienced firsthand the tension and conflicts associated with a company trying to provide reliable, low-cost power while facing opposition from residents about their environmental concerns, such as tree pruning or removal and the crossing of pristine marshes, and their concerns about general aesthetics. Back then, I saw my job — the provision of power — above all else. As a consequence, I viewed the environmental opponents as “wrong” and “not getting it.”

In 2000, I was introduced to polarity management, and it changed that sort of “either-or” thinking for me. F. Scott Fitzgerald once said, “The true test of a first-rate mind is the ability to hold two contradictory ideas at the same time.” This is called “both-and” thinking. When you have the ability to identify and tap the positives of two very different, yet valuable, viewpoints, you can see a broader picture from which to then create balance and solutions that are more sustainable over time.

In the case of providing electricity, we could have done so by appreciating those contradictory views rather than having antagonism and conflict. In fact, by focusing at the same time on the positives of respecting the environment as well as the positives of cost-effective, reliable power, we would have had more robust planning that involved the community alongside the power company.

Back to Maersk, Grady Johnson's mention of the need to see this issue more holistically is sound advice. This issue requires first-rate thinking that takes multiple viewpoints into account to create a sustainable plan and solution. I suggest our leaders utilize the principles of “both-and” thinking to best serve our community as a whole. Use of these principles to analyze the issue can pave the way

for the invitation of differing views and a more complete picture. From this greater understanding, key leaders could act collaboratively in line with common goals that we all share as members of this community, regardless of our position on the issue.

These sorts of issues with the port are not new, nor have they been approached with the whole picture in mind. For many years, I've heard citizens speak about the port as if it were an isolated part of our community. That view disregards the port's impact on our local and state economies, which, in light of current economic conditions, are in need of all the support they can muster.

For years I heard “stop port growth.” The business community has responded, “expand the port.” These positions seemed to be based on a concern for the environment and a very different, contradictory concern for economic stability. So who's right? I'm going to suggest that both groups are right and need to be honored. It's how we go about creating a balance between the sides over time that can be most helpful. Imagine a community in which leaders come together to hear all sides and use both-and thinking to figure out how to get balanced solutions.

Yes, people have been successful in thwarting the port for the past two decades. I suggest that victory will be short-lived. Savannah will continue to bolster its competitive position and take away our business at the expense of our economy.

This both-and approach isn't just about dealing with the port; it's about many other complex community issues such as taxation, education, housing, transit and jails. I know and can predict this: If groups fail to collaborate and get the best of each viewpoint, our community is destined to something much less than the greatness we've experienced in the past few decades. Fact is, when you're dealing with a polarity, the two viewpoints must have each other over time. So if you win and the other side loses, you set yourself up for a future loss — because in the long term, even the winners become losers.

Let's choose to approach these complex issues as a community that holds a common purpose and seeks out, understands and honors divergent opinions when making community decisions. ■

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