



Port of Cleveland's soon-to-be requested tax levy could help transform our waterfronts: Steve Litt

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By **Steven Litt**, *The Plain Dealer*

Clevelanders love to complain that the city's lakefront is pathetic in comparison with Chicago's.

With miles of bike trails, marinas, beaches, cultural institutions and attractions such as **Millennium Park** and Navy Pier, Chicago's shoreline is one of the world's great urban wonders.

But what counts most in the comparison is that the Chicago lakefront grew out of decades of focused civic willpower.

Cleveland has no such record. To be sure, it's had recent triumphs on the lake and the river, including the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, the Jacobs Pavilion concert stage, the new Rivergate Park for recreational rowing and the upcoming Flats East Bank office project.

Yet on balance, the city's nine-mile Lake Erie shoreline is cut off by highways and railroads and dominated by an airport, an industrial port, private marinas and a string of shabby and isolated state-run parks.

The riverbanks on the lower Cuyahoga River are still lined by thousands of yards of fallow, formerly industrial properties awaiting new development that shows little sign of happening soon.

It's a sad picture, and a big liability at a time when new demographic trends suggest that young adults, empty nesters and others are spurning suburbs and flocking to cities that make themselves attractive places to live. Author Alan Ehrenhalt, in his new book on the topic, calls the phenomenon "**The Great Inversion.**"

Given this background, it's big news that the Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Port Authority has come forward with a credible, well-conceived plan to rethink and rebuild critical pieces of infrastructure on the lakefront and along the river.

The port's five-year, \$90 million plan, released earlier this month, would:

- Repair collapsing bulkheads on the river and stabilize the sliding, 31-acre hillside at Irishtown Bend, which threatens shipping on the river.



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A much-desired pedestrian bridge from the downtown Cleveland Mall to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, shown here in a sectional rendering by URS Cleveland, has a better chance of becoming a reality if voters approve the levy increase to be requested this November by the Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Port Authority.

- Help the city build a 500-space parking garage at North Coast Harbor to serve the new medical mart and convention center, plus a pedestrian bridge to connect the downtown Mall to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.
- Squeeze decades of additional use out of the city's lakefront landfills by improving the way dredged sediment from the bottom of the river is deposited in them.
- Improve port activities and related truck routes through the Flats.
- Clean or cap polluted sediments in the old channel of the Cuyahoga.

The port's to-do list is modest in comparison with **Daniel Burnham's 1909 Plan of Chicago**, which established the vision for Grant Park, Navy Pier, Lincoln Park Beach and other treasures.

But make no mistake, the port's vision, shaped by Will Friedman, its director since 2010, is well-focused and absolutely necessary.

By addressing seemingly intractable problems at key pressure points along the city's waterfronts, the plan could unleash hundreds of millions of dollars in private investment. Not incidentally, it would make Cleveland a far better place to live.

The plan is also visionary in that it balances recreation, economic development and industry, while recognizing the vital connection between the river and the lakefront — something no other Cleveland city plan has ever done so well.

The catch, of course, is that to pay for it, the port will ask county residents in November to approve a five-year increase in the property tax from \$3.50 to \$20 for every \$100,000 of valuation.

By now, you've read or heard that the tax would amount to a **400 percent increase** over the previous port levy, which sounds outrageous.

What's less shocking is that the incremental increase of \$16.50 per \$100,000 of value is the same as a few cups of coffee at Starbucks.

This is not to belittle the burden, which could prove especially challenging in the city. Cleveland is caught in a spiral of falling property values and rising costs, which means taxes have to be raised on a shrinking population even to maintain the status quo.



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David I. Andersen, The Plain Dealer

A 2001 photograph shows landfills at Burke Lakefront Airport used to deposit sediment dredged from the Cuyahoga River to keep the ship channel clear for ore boats serving the city's steel industry. The Cleveland port authority has a plan to squeeze more years of use out of the landfills - which could save the city and the federal government the hundreds of millions of dollars it would cost to build new landfills.

Voters will feel a new pinch severely in November, when the city's school district is seeking approval for a **50 percent increase in taxes**, equivalent to \$294 more a year on the average city home.

Nevertheless, the port levy deserves approval for many reasons. One is that infrastructure — encompassing roads, bridges, sewers and the like — is a fundamentally a public responsibility and has always been recognized as such in the United States.

The port's request, at \$90 million, is also modest in comparison with other big upcoming investments aimed at rejuvenating an urban region that is showing signs of age.

The Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District is **spending \$3 billion** over 25 years to dramatically reduce the amount of raw sewage that flows into Lake Erie from combined storm and sanitary sewers during heavy rains. The Ohio Department of Transportation has proposed spending \$3.5 billion over the next two decades to revamp the downtown Inner Belt highway system.

Alongside those investments, the port proposal looks modest indeed. But it would pay big dividends. By demonstrating the willpower to raise early dollars locally for the waterfronts, the port estimates it could leverage an additional \$101 million for its key projects, mainly from state and federal sources, but also from private companies and property owners.

The combined \$191 million in spending would safeguard existing industrial activities on the river and lake and help open up the waterfronts for everyone.

The proposed pedestrian bridge from the Mall to the Rock Hall has been a dream of city planners for years, but absent the port proposal, so far, there's been no clear way to pay for it.

The city just got shot down a second time in its attempt to secure a federal grant for the bridge, in part because the application lacked a credible proposal for local matching funds.

Without the pedestrian bridge, the city will continue to lack a clearly accessible walking path from Public Square to its



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Gus Chan, The Plain Dealer

Every year the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers spends millions of dollars to dredge the Cuyahoga River.

premier waterfront attraction — something it very much needs to complement the new medical mart, convention center and downtown casino.

At Irishtown Bend, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has estimated it would cost \$80 million to \$219 million to stabilize the collapsing hillside. Port director Friedman thinks his agency can get the job done for \$50 million or less by using innovative engineering techniques the federal government hasn't contemplated.

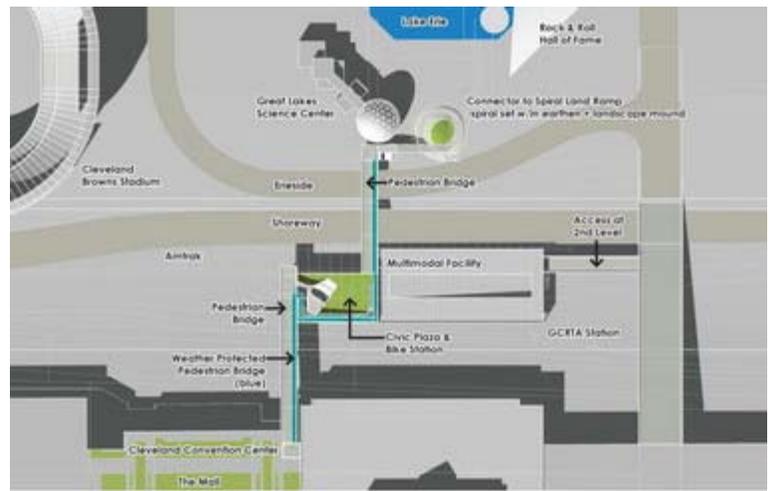
Fixing the hillside would speed the completion of a new system of trails connecting the Tremont and Ohio City neighborhoods to Wendy Park on Whiskey Island, which would likely unleash other investments and improve the city's attractiveness to visitors and new residents, drawing the dollars they'd bring with them.

Around the country, cities are investing heavily in parks and waterfronts. Cleveland can't participate fully in that trend — and reap the economic benefits — unless it addresses the items on the port's list.

Of course, the country is also in the grips of a fierce anti-tax mood and a debate over the proper size and role of government. Yet it's been clear for years that, absent strong public-sector leadership, problems such as the Irishtown Bend hillside, 80 percent of which is owned by public entities, will never be fixed. And right now, strong leadership is coming from the port.

This is a pivotal moment for Cleveland and Cuyahoga County. In fact, it's a Chicago moment. We can take the first necessary steps toward a waterfront renaissance or postpone a better future. It's that simple.

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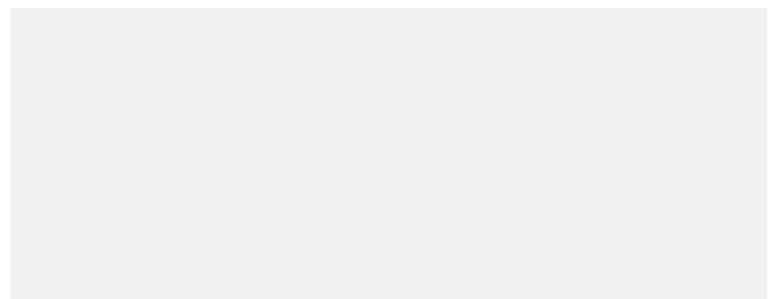
The federal government rejected this plan for a parking garage and walkway connecting the Cleveland Mall to North Coast Harbor. A new proposal from the Port of Cleveland could make the project happen - but it depends on a modest increase in county property taxes.



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John Kuntz, The Plain Dealer

Riverbed Street at Irishtown Bend, shown in 2011, is unusable because the hillside is sliding downhill toward the Cuyahoga River. Eighty percent of the 31 acres on the hill are owned by public entities, including Cleveland and the Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority. They haven't been able to put together a plan to fix the hill - but now the city's port authority has such a plan.





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Cleveland Design Competition

Jason Sowell & Hope Hasbrouck from Austin, TX, won second place in 2007 in the first-ever international Cleveland Design competition for their proposal to turn Irishtown Bend into a park. A plan from the Cleveland port authority to fix the sliding hillside could make a park like the one envisioned here a reality.