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GUEST COLUMN: Port has proceeded in good faith

PHYLLIS SAATHOFF Port Freeport CEO

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Construction on homes promised to East End homeowners as part of the Port Freeport expansion takes place in September 2016 along Ninth Street in Freeport. Port Freeport's headquarters can be seen in the background.

Facts file photo

Texas voters created Port Freeport almost 100 years ago, in 1925. Since then, the port has been growing bigger, deeper and wider to support not only our nation, but our state and community as well.

I have had the privilege to monitor this progress professionally since 1992, when I began my career at Port Freeport, but I have been a resident of our community for 38 years. Southern Brazoria County is like nowhere else in Texas, and as CEO of Port Freeport, it is my job to be a passionate champion of economic opportunity for both the port and the community in which we live.

To that end, we have been working for more than 20 years to acquire property in the East End of Freeport. The port now owns about 95 percent of the property in the East End and is in the process of finalizing the remaining transactions. While the port has not initiated any projects in this area, we anticipate it will accommodate operations necessary to facilitate additional international commerce and allow for the efficient management of truck traffic, reducing both congestion and emissions. Additionally, this area will support the expanded operations of U.S. Customs and Border Protection and U.S. Department of Agriculture. Acquiring this land allows the port to plan and prepare for expansion, encouraging more investment in our region and state, creating more economic activity and jobs that will support families in our community.

The process of acquiring land, especially residential property, has several stages. It starts with willing buyer/seller agreements. This is how the port acquired more than 80 percent of the property in the East End. We offered residents fair market value based on certified appraisals and additionally provided relocation services and funds for independent legal and financial advice to the property owners. In 2015, the port voluntarily began a program in which East End-owned properties were exchanged for newly built homes. Through the deed-for-deed exchange program, we are proud that Port Freeport provided 44 new homes for families who resided adjacent to the port, an over \$6 million investment in the Freeport community alone. These modern, energy-efficient homes were provided to Freeport families with no mortgage.

The remaining approximate 13 percent of vacant lots and residential properties moved to the eminent domain process. This process is also based on fair market value offers from independent, certified appraisals. Many of the properties that went through eminent domain had title discrepancies due to multiple generations of unknown heirs or outstanding liens unrelated to the port that prevented a willing seller/buyer sale. Port staff and attorneys worked diligently to clear title discrepancies and ensure rightful owners were compensated.

A relocation assistance firm was retained by the port to assist the families through the process of locating and transitioning to another comparable home of their choice in the area. That assistance included compensation for market differences. This same assistance is being provided to the few

remaining residents of the East End, and we will continue to work to find the best solution for each family.

Each and every offer to residential property owners was made in good faith, at a fair market value and in addition to the relocation support.

The heartbeat of the port is our community, and we strive to be good neighbors throughout each phase of our growth. Port Freeport has benefited immensely from our community, just as our community, our region and our state benefits from the port. I am proud to be part of Port Freeport's legacy and I hope our community is too.

Phyllis Saathoff is executive director and CEO of Port Freeport.