

# Port of Portland director Bill Wyatt to retire in June, setting up leadership debate

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"It's critical that the governor conduct a full nationwide search for a new Port Director. To do otherwise would perpetuate exactly the kind backdoor, insider dealing that she assured voters she would avoid."

The Port of Portland said Wednesday that its executive director since 2001, Bill Wyatt, will retire at the end of June, a move that some hope will set up a wide-ranging discussion about changes in leadership, governance and the overall mission of the agency.

Among the most pressing questions: whether Gov. Kate Brown and the nine governor-appointed Port commissioners will slot [Wyatt's hand-picked successor](#) into the lucrative and politically connected position.

The Port manages the airport, marine shipping terminals and industrial properties around the city. Billions of dollars of goods and millions of passengers pass through its facilities annually. It's a crucial player in economic development statewide, from travel and tourism to shipping Oregon-made products throughout the globe. Though the agency operates largely under the public's radar, it has become a lightning rod for environmental and community activists, as well as labor groups and exporters around the state.

In a news release announcing his retirement, the Port credited Wyatt with a series of accomplishments. The most visible to the public are those at Portland International Airport, which has added 10 international flights during his tenure, has made \$2 billion in capital improvements, and garners rave reviews from trade publications and customer satisfaction surveys.

At the marine terminals, the news release cited the growth of auto shipping and the retention of jobs due to capital investments by tenants, but ignored the [loss of container shipping](#) at Terminal 6 and bitter disputes between longshoremen and the terminal operator chosen by the Port.

Bill Wyatt  
Courtesy Port of Portland

The Port also highlighted the brownfield redevelopment project of the Reynolds Industrial Park in Troutdale, now home to 800 FedEx jobs. And it credited Wyatt with a number of environmental improvements.

"Bill has been a skilled, dynamic and admired leader and I know I speak for all of the Commission when I say how grateful we are for his unparalleled service," Port Commission President Jim Carter said in a news release.

Yet the Port and Wyatt have harsh critics. The agency has been locked in conflict, and often on the losing side, with environmental and community groups for decades. Bob Sallinger, conservation director of the Portland Chapter of the Audubon Society, called Wyatt's tenure "a stunning record of major failures" and described the agency's record on environmental issues as "abysmal."

Among other things, he pointed to the Port's unsuccessful efforts to rezone West Hayden Island as industrial land, its foot-dragging and criticism of efforts to clean up the Portland Harbor Superfund site, and its controversial and unsuccessful effort to locate a massive propane export terminal at Terminal 6.

"We had high hopes for Bill when he came in, but he hasn't delivered," he said. "It's going to take a lot more vision."

The Port's idled container shipping terminal has also been a source of contention around the state. The terminal lost its two main carriers, Hanjin Shipping and Hapag-Lloyd, in early 2015, forcing Eastern Oregon agricultural producers to pay as much as \$1,000 more per container to truck their goods to Tacoma, Washington.

Kevin Mannix, a former state legislator and gubernatorial candidate, has proposed creating a new shipping authority to take over Terminal 6 from the Port and reestablish the service. He thanked Wyatt for his service and said he's been successful on many fronts, but suggested that the terminal was an essential element of the state's economic model and that the situation there had spun out of control.

He said Wyatt's departure provided an opportunity to change the makeup of the commission, which he believes should be

appointed by county commissioners around the state, not the governor. And those commissioners should then look to hire an industry expert as executive director.

"It's a state port but it acts like a local port, as if its activities should reflect only local concerns," he said. "It's not fulfilling its function...Its mission should be rewritten to make it more accountable around the state and take it out of the patronage system."

Port leadership is seen by many as a product of the patronage system, and a handsomely paid opportunity at that. The executive director is selected by nine Port commissioners, who in turn are appointed by the governor. And the governor's office has had a revolving door with agency leadership.

Wyatt's predecessor, longtime Oregon legislator Mike Thorne, was appointed after his political ally, then Gov. Neil Goldschmidt, reappointed the entire port commission, which then selected Thorne for the job.

Curtis RobinholdLC-

Wyatt was the chief of staff of former Gov. John Kitzhaber when he was selected for the job during Kitzhaber's second term in office. And Wyatt, in turn, reached back into the governor's office in 2013 to select Kitzhaber's then chief of staff, Curtis Robinhold, as his deputy and heir apparent.

Robinhold's position was not posted, not announced and there was no search. The meeting materials Wyatt filed with commissioners before they considered the appointment said it was expected that Robinhold would fairly quickly assume the responsibilities of the Port's chief executive.

"While the commission will remain free to choose the next executive director," the agenda item said, "it is expected that the deputy will become the most qualified candidate."

The executive director and his deputy are among the best-paid positions in state government. Wyatt's current salary is \$418,419 while Robinhold earns \$315,977, according to Port spokeswoman Melanie Mesaros. Both are also eligible for annual bonuses, though Mesaros said she couldn't immediately find those figures Wednesday.

Given their typically lengthy tenure, Port leaders can expect healthy payouts from Oregon's Public Employee Retirement Fund. Thorne, for instance, currently collects annual pension benefits of \$173,000.

Peter Bragdon, general counsel of Columbia Sportswear, former chief of staff for Gov. Ted Kulongoski, and a former Port commissioner, disputes the notion that anyone has been appointed to Port leadership as a reward for service. He said the Port needs a leader who can run a complex public enterprise amid constantly changing market conditions, whether it be shipping rates, auto imports, gas prices, trade tariffs and others factors. Wyatt, he says, was a good pick for the job and did an excellent job keeping all the Port's plates spinning.

In a letter announcing his retirement date, Wyatt said he was confident the Port will be in good hands going forward, and that the commission president would be announcing the selection process for his replacement in the next few days.

"While I expect it to be an open and competitive process, I'm very pleased that my Deputy Curtis Robinhold will be a candidate," he wrote. "I've known Curtis for over 20 years, and I am entirely confident of his capacity for this important work."

Critics are watching what Brown and the commissioners do next.

"We feel that it is critical that the governor conduct a full nationwide search for a new Port Director," Sallinger said in an email Wednesday. "To do otherwise (i.e. appoint Curtis Robinhold) would perpetuate exactly the kind of backdoor, insider dealing that she assured voters she would avoid."

- Ted Sickinger

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