

Alexa Wutt: This is Alexa Wutt from Michigan Sea Grant at the National Working Waterfront Symposium in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Today is May 15, 2018. So, Peter, I will ask if you could please state and spell your name, share your occupation and town and today's date.

Peter Huston: My name is Peter Houston, spelled H-U-S-T-O-N. I'm a filmmaker by trade. I live on South Bass Island in the village of Put-in-Bay off the coast of northern Ohio. I run our little Chamber of Commerce there. This is pretty much our busiest time of the year as we get into the summer.

AW: Good time for another conference, right?

PH: That's right.

AW: So, the first question we will start out with is a broad one. What is your working waterfront story?

PH: So, Put-in-Bay, which is really part of a whole archipelago of islands, basically became a successful place to live because of the wine industry in the 1850s. A Hispanic fellow named Jose De Rivera bought the islands, brought in German farmers, they started to cultivate grapes. By the 1860s, 1870s, all of the Bass Islands' three islands, Middle Bass, North Bass, and South Bass were all heavily cultivated with grapes. The industry kind of came in behind that. So, our waterfront, the docks, and everything had been up until that time, have been mostly for transfer of cargo or getting firewood for the steamships. But then when the grape industry really started to take hold, it was more about the transfer of either juice or wines or grapes to be able to be taken on and off the island. So, most of our docks, most of our waterfront, was built during that time period. Today, pretty much all of the main working waterfront on our islands is connected to transportation. We don't have a lot of support industry on the islands. The fishing industry was negotiated in a treaty in the [19]70s with Canada. So, we have pleasure of fishing as a transient time of the year in the spring and in the fall. We have a lot of fishermen who come up to fish for game, for fun. But really transportation is our main industry and then pleasure boaters in the summertime that come for day trips or weekend excursions to the islands.

AW: Very cool. So, a question associated with that would be, what are the challenges and successes you have seen with your community's waterfront?

PH: Well, right now our biggest challenge is the water level. Of course, the water level has been an issue over the last five years, for certain, where it was low, and now, we're at extreme highs. So, when you have extreme highs right now, just like extreme lows, it really deters the transportation aspect. If the wind blows in the wrong direction, it means that there's no way to get on or off the vessels. Sometimes the vessels can't even get in to be able to load or unload. So, that's a huge detriment when your economy is built on transporting people for tourism purposes. So, that's probably our biggest challenge. As far as being able to look towards the future, one of the things that we see as being the key to our future has to be a way to be able to have dedicated transportation to all of the islands. Because right now, other than the South Bass, Put-in-Bay and North and Middle Bass, some of the other islands don't have any regularly scheduled transportation that can be accessed by the public, at least not without a huge expense.

So, in order for our islands to be able to grow and prosper for populations to remain stable, we have to be able to expand the transportation to access.

AW: What are some emerging issues associated with the waterfront? You spoke to this a little bit, I think, with the challenge of sea level change.

PH: Of course, they're not making new waterfront. So, a majority of our islands are privately owned. The few pieces that are publicly owned, some of them are owned by different entities. You've got the State of Ohio. You have our port authority or the village of Put-in-Bay or the township of Put-in-Bay, depending on who owns it, affects the structure of funding. So, we're struggling. We have two governments, one island. We have different entities controlling different access points. We have the village of Put-in-Bay having access points. We have transportation boats owning their own docks. Then we have the State of Ohio being involved. So, the complexity of being able to keep all of these different access points open is one of the biggest challenges.

AW: Sure. What makes your working waterfront important in the community?

PH: Well, I think it is the lifeblood of the community. I think there was a time perhaps a hundred years ago when people were more likely to be more island-centric but because we lost the fishing industry, because we depend on transportation for everything from food to our consumables to our tourists, we were really beholden to the transportation and to the waterfront being part of the daily part of life. So, coming and going and being able to have access to that has become part of island life.

AW: What is your vision for this community going forward? If you had a blank piece of paper, you could write something in.

PH: Technology is working in our favor right now as far as people willing to stay on the island longer. We had islanders who were there most of the year. Then we had transient cottagers. But with technology coming, with the satellite, and now maybe even broadband coming to our island, we can see more and more people being able to live on off-grid existence, to be able to live there longer periods of the year. This can help us to keep a stable population. The long-term growth then is that if you can maintain a stable population, you can grow waterfront businesses. You can start to be able to look towards bringing more people to some of the other islands that lost the ability to be a year-round community. So, really the vision is for growth as long as we can maintain this stable access.

AW: On a more personal level, what is one of your favorite memories associated with your working waterfront?

PH: When I was a kid, my parents belonged to a sailing club. So, every summer we would go up to Put-in-Bay for a couple of weekends for sailing, for racing, and whatever. Being able to be a kid on an island is a life-changing thing. I didn't grow up there. But you have the memories of that ability to roam and explore. Your family's not worried about the same kinds of things that they would be in the urban neighborhood. So, growing up on an island like that, even if it's just

for a little bit in the summertime, brought to me an opportunity to be able to hang out, go sailing, to be able to be free to do what we wanted to do. My friends, matter of fact, my wife and I grew up together. We had great memories of being able to spend time as kids roaming. You don't see that today so much. But the safety level was so different at that point. Being able to let your children go off and do what they were doing. We sailed in regattas up there as kids and with other kids our age group. So, that experience pretty much was what brought me back to Ohio. I had lived in Boston. I love Boston. I love sailing. I loved the waterfront. I lived in Vermont. Then when I had an opportunity to come back to live on South Bass and Put-in-Bay, I snapped it right up.

AW: Very cool. How can the National Working Waterfront Network support you going forward in your community?

PH: Well, that's an interesting thing. I've been listening to this idea of how we can deal with solving problems. That's really what this is all about. I mean, what led me here was the idea of creating this coalition of island communities. So, we got involved last year with the island communities of the Great Lakes, the Great Lakes Coalition. There are about twenty islands with full-time year-round residents. We're able to collaborate. The working waterfronts is a direct connect to that because with almost every island, there's a mainland community that is connected in an umbilical cord kind of sense. We mostly depend on the Community of Port Clinton because the access points for the ferries are over there. So, when you go to the mainland to go shopping, when you go there to get clothes, when you go there to be able to get your car repaired, you need your boat fixed or whatever it is, you're overlapped in so many ways. So, that whole process of working with a mainland community and the island community is kind of the outgrowth that we can see with these working waterfronts. How can we kind of grow that relationship? At one point, Port Clinton was where the Matthews Boat Company was in Sandusky, not too far away, was where Lyman's were built. The propellers were made. One of the strengths of our area was the maritime industry. Over the years, that maritime industry, whether it was the transportation, the fishing, the boat-building, has withered away. So, whether or not it changes Put-in-Bay specifically, could it change the community that we're connected with, with Port Clinton? Yes. I think that that's really where we could see things like what you're doing with the storytelling and being able to ferret it out, what people remember as being the strengths of their community, and seeing whether or not we can bring that back in some fashion.

AW: I am curious too, do you ever see conflicting interests between the mainland and island populations?

PH: Well, certainly. I mean, one of the things that's happening the most right now is I guess we would call gentrification or development. On our island, we have a small group called the Lake Erie Conservancy that does everything they can, whenever they can to be able to raise enough money to be able to preserve open space because open space is disappearing. Open space is highly coveted. It's coveted by people who have enough money to have a second home or are looking to relocate later in their life. They're willing to pay, to buy up these open spaces to develop homes. When you develop spaces like that, what is lost in the translation where some of the sustaining industries, whether it was the waterfront industries, the maritime industries, could

have been agriculture, it could have been just having marsh land for migration of birds. I mean, a lot of these things are starting to be choked off. So, when you're in a desirable place and everybody wants to be there, it puts a lot more strain on the community. It puts a much higher dependence on the off-island support systems, whether it's food or fuel or whatever it is, having to be able to support a bigger population.

AW: An extension of the previous question about National Working Waterfronts Network is, what tools, networks, or information do you think you would need that would help you better address your working waterfront challenges? I know you have mentioned there is the island coalition. Is there anything national working waterfronts could provide in a sense?

PH: Well, this is certainly something new for me. I'm learning as I go here, to see how this could apply. I'm sure there are great lessons to be taken back from this. Growing our harbors, being able to better manage our resources, understanding again, this relationship between our island community and the mainland communities. I do see past history, the idea of other people's problem-solving being the key thing that you can share. That's where we looked at the Island Coalition where other islanders have had to solve problems regarding water quality or recycling or whatever it was, medical care. We can look at those same kinds of things and see how those have worked in other waterfront communities. Perhaps we can gain some insights. Here in Michigan, you see some of those great relationships, like with Traverse City and Beaver Island, and Mackinaw City and Mackinaw Island, where there's a synergy that has to take place in order for both of those communities to survive.

AW: Anything else that you wanted to add?

PH: Well, again, I think that we're here to learn. That's what we're trying to take away. Because people back on the island, a lot of times they say, "Well, we've been there, done that. We've tried this, tried that." So, we have to keep trying, to bring back new ideas, new insights. Other challenges are going to come down the road, or we need to be able to solve the problems if we have some relationships that we build here, maybe we do that. That's why I'm here. I think that John Allen, who's from the Department of Natural Resources here in Michigan, has been a great resource for us. He and Matt Presser have helped us to gain insights. Like yourself with the Sea Grant program, we have a Sea Grant program on Put-In-Bay with Ohio State. All of those things add to our ability to better work through some of our problems like algal blooms, which I didn't even mention, which is probably one of the bigger issues of our Great Lake right now.

AW: It is interesting how all these different issues interconnect, whatever community you are in, and especially in our Great Lakes region, obviously, but even by extension to some of the saltwater communities, if you will. So, I think those are all the questions I had. I will pause the recording.

PH: Yes. Algal blooms, we're going to see a long-term effect, tourism, whatever. I don't know what's worse, but [laughter].

AW: All tradeoffs.

[end of transcript]