

Planners win grant for shoreline drive study

By Meaghan Wims/Daily News staff

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The Aquidneck Island Planning Commission has received state support for studying constructing a shoreline drive along Burma Road, a key initiative in the commission's plan to re-shape the island's west side.

The regional planning commission applied for the competitive grant from the Rhode Island Statewide Planning Program and was awarded \$30,000, which it will use to hire an engineering firm to conduct the feasibility study.

The planning commission's West Side Master Plan proposes opening Burma Road as a new shoreline drive, which would reduce traffic volumes on West Main Road and provide scenic views of Narragansett Bay. The master plan proposes marketing the road as a scenic drive, "second only" to Ocean Drive in Newport.

Under the plan, Burma Road would become a two-lane road, starting from a realigned intersection with Stringham Road in Portsmouth's Melville neighborhood, connecting the Gate 17 Access Road to Coddington Highway in Middletown and extending Simonpietri Drive through Naval Station Newport. Doing so would require federal approval and would require the Navy to alter its security perimeter. Some Navy parking and buildings might need to be relocated. The study will assess those measures.

The commission had received a technical assistance grant from the federal Environmental Protection Agency's Smart Growth program for recommendations on how Aquidneck Island can incorporate aspects of the commission's West Side Master Plan into local ordinances.

But this is the first funding for study of a specific proposal within the master plan, and a first step in the initiative, in its earliest stages, to reshape the 10-mile stretch of land from the Gateway Center in Newport to the Mount Hope Bridge.

"We really are excited," Tina Dolen, the commission's executive director, said Tuesday. "On the face of it, when you hear 'feasibility study' for a shoreline drive, it doesn't sound too sexy. But opening up a shoreline drive and eventually having an alternative to West Main Road are the long-term results of these baby steps."

Teresa Crean, the commission's land-use planner, will lead the effort. Portsmouth is the project's sponsor, and the town's planner, Robert W. Gilstein, will assist the planning commission. Public hearings will be held throughout development of the study.

The study will examine existing roadway conditions and serve as the basis for the subsequent design phase. It also will initiate discussions with the Navy regarding jurisdictional issues associated with opening all of Burma Road to the public.