

Blue Trail will improve Bay Access

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By Ted Nesi/Providence Business News

When a group of elected officials and Newport County residents put in their kayaks for an inaugural paddle along the new Narragansett Bay Blue Trail on Friday, Aug. 22, it won't be just any summer boat ride – it will also mark the first phase of an ambitious plan to transform the west side of Aquidneck Island.

The coastal Blue Trail, which will eventually stretch the length of the island, will provide boaters with public ocean-access points to launch their crafts. Two of those “put-ins,” or small piers, will be dedicated in the upcoming ceremony; seven more are still to come.

(The trail's launch – originally scheduled for last week– was postponed after the disappearance at sea of Philip Ruhle Sr., a well-known local fishing captain whose ship sank off the New Jersey coast on July 23.)

The nearly \$30,000 cost of planning and constructing the put-ins was paid for by contributions from the van Beuren Charitable Foundation and the Prince Charitable Trusts.

“This is an integral part of opening up the Bay to every Rhode Islander,” said Michael Sullivan, director of the R.I. Department of Environmental Management, who wants to open a new pier each year. He said the Blue Trail's accessibility will “give people who see Narragansett Bay from Route 95 a chance to enjoy the beauty and the bounty.”

The Blue Trail is one of the key recreational proposals contained in the West Side Master Plan, a 350-page development strategy agreed to by local, state and federal officials in 2005. The document, which addresses economic, environmental, recreation, transport and utilities planning on Aquidneck Island, is guiding the development of the 5,000-acre area west of Route 114 along the Bay, stretching from the Mount Hope Bridge in Portsmouth, through Middletown, and south to the Gateway Visitors Center in Newport.

The master plan is set to take on new importance later this summer, when the Navy is expected to announce that it no longer needs to keep large swaths of prime west side coastland, including much of the shoreline in Middletown. The Navy's expected announcement would clear the way for some of the land to be transferred for public use, a process that typically takes between 18 and 24 months.

The Aquidneck Island Planning Commission has spent the past eight years preparing for the land's post-Navy development, with a focus on maintaining the island's quality of life, creating sustainable economic-development opportunities, protecting the environment, and providing public access to Narragansett Bay. Roughly 3 million people visit Aquidneck each year. The island has approximately 60,000 year-round residents.

“I am really excited, because this is a new beginning for the island as we look ahead for this Navy property disposition,” said Tina Dolen, the commission's executive director.

The plan also foresees a range of other uses for the area beyond recreation, including the expansion of marine industry, continued support for local naval operations and construction of a

new north-south island road on what is now Burma Road, which would reduce traffic on Route 114.

“It would just be a stunning destination for the west side,” said Dolen, who previously worked on conservation- and land-use issues as a county commissioner on Cape Cod.

“If we could acquire not only Greene Lane Park and Midway Fishing Pier, but the additional coastline west of Burma Road up to Portsmouth, we would have a ribbon of green [property] available to the public where people could pull in and fish or launch a kayak, and enjoy the Bay,” she said. “It would really be a tremendous asset.”

Dolen’s comments were echoed by Sullivan, who said the area is like “a last great frontier, where you’re looking at some tremendous, exciting transformation from the last 100 years of usage to what the future brings.”

Sullivan said he is particularly focused on ensuring that the area is open to anyone, and expressed concern about the difficulty an average citizen would have walking along the shore in Newport, for example. He also wants to make sure there are affordable ways for people to travel there, such as dedicated Rhode Island Public Transit Authority buses.

Ted Clement, executive director of the Aquidneck Land Trust, is also enthusiastic, because the master plan would significantly increase the amount of land on the island set aside for conservation.

“We just hope that people will continue to keep their eyes on the need for more open space, just considering how densely populated our island is, and how out of balance with other island communities it is,” he said.

Only about 20 percent of the land on Aquidneck Island is currently protected, Clement said. By comparison, more than 70 percent of the land on neighboring Prudence Island is protected, more than 40 percent is protected on Block Island and Nantucket, and about 35 percent is protected on Martha’s Vineyard, according to the land trust.

Clement’s group hopes to secure protection for about 90 parcels of open space, totaling over 2,000 acres, that remain available. That will be easier to do, he said, if the new public spaces make more people value Aquidneck’s natural resources.

“The Blue Trail is just another wonderful avenue to get people outdoors, and the more that people start connecting with our natural world, the better stewards they’re going to become,” he said.