

Public comment invited on revamping Burma Road

The plan would make Burma Road a major traffic artery, and land surrounding it would be redeveloped.

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Turning Burma Road into a spruced-up and more easily accessible scenic drive will be the subject of a public hearing to be hosted tonight by the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission.

As envisioned by the commission, a revamped Burma Road, renamed Shoreline Drive, would feature a textured median, wooden guide rails, sidewalks and a bike path. The road would also be redesigned at both ends to make it easier to navigate and better connected to the island's other transportation corridors.

Tonight's meeting will focus on these two so-called "gateway" projects, at the northern and southern end of Burma Road. One addresses the hairpin turn at the intersection of Stringham and Burma roads, in Portsmouth. The other proposed Gateway involves extending Burma Road to Coddington Highway, instead of forcing traffic out onto congested West Main Road, via the Navy's Gate 17 access road.

Shoreline Drive is a key recommendation of the commission's West Side Master Plan, which was released last November. The plan envisions Burma Road, also known as Defense Highway, becoming a major north-south traffic artery and some 350 acres of unused Navy land surrounding it being redeveloped for marine industries and waterfront residences.

Since then, the commission has hired a consultant, Pare Engineering, to conduct a \$30,000 study of the proposed Shoreline Drive gateways. Tonight, the consultant will give an overview of the project and facilitate a public discussion of the gateway concepts.

"We see the Shoreline Drive recommendation as a unifying element for all of the other West Side recommendations," said Teresa Crean, the commission's land-use planner. "If this feasibility study can show there would be congestion mitigation [from West Main Road] then it will succeed in other ways as well."

Tonight's meeting will be held from 7 to 9 p.m. at Portsmouth Town Hall. It is the first of three meetings that Pare will hold. The next one will come after the consultant has completed its analysis of the issues surrounding the project. The last one will be dedicated to the presentation of the final report. The study is expected to be completed by May.

Realigning the sharply curved junction of Stringham and Burma roads would allow traffic to flow more efficiently through the area. But the commission also considers the intersection "critical to providing access for the Melville Marine Village, in Portsmouth." The master plan identifies the waterfront locale as having the potential to be a vibrant mixed-use marina village.

The other gateway project would connect the new Shoreline Drive to Coddington Highway via the Navy's Simonpietri Drive. Currently, the Simonpietri sits between Gates 10 and 11 and is not open

to the public.

Much of the Shoreline Drive proposal relies upon the willingness of the Navy to go along with the project. And, at this point, said Crean, it's unclear exactly where the Navy stands. The commission has provided a copy of its master plan to the Navy.

"Any improvement to Burma Road would have to involve cooperation from the Navy," said Crean. "We've heard no objections, but we haven't been able to get a commitment." At this point, she said, the goal is to "just keep the Navy as informed as we possibly can."

Pare Engineering will address, to a lesser degree, some of the other recommendations in the master plan. These include such intermodal transportation features as a bike path, RIPTA bus service and light rail service along the Newport Secondary Line.

"We've asked the consultant to identify areas at either end of the corridor where a park-and-ride might work," Crean said, as well as where crosswalks and a bike path might be situated at the gateways.

Meanwhile, the commission is awaiting another study, Crean said. This study, due to be completed soon, is being conducted by a team under the Environmental Protection Agency that has studied the various regulatory issues that would affect the West Side proposals.