

Middletown council OKs park concept for bay shore

By Meaghan Wims/Journal Staff Writer 11/06/07

MIDDLETOWN -- A park at the old Midway Pier would open public access to the town's western Narragansett Bay waterfront for the first time. Kayakers, fishermen, swimmers, bikers and families would all enjoy the spot's potential swimming area, playground, trails and bike path.

The proposed Greene Lane Park is a key fixture in the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission's plan for the island's west shore. Now it's time to get the plan "off the shelves" and start the groundwork for the park, Tina Dolen, the planning commission's executive director, told the Town Council last night.

The council, for the second time in two years, endorsed the Greene Lane Park concept and gave Dolen the go-ahead to advocate for acquiring the land for it from the Navy.

The Navy is working on a master plan for all its properties on Aquidneck Island's west shore and is expected to transfer ownership of some of what it deems surplus property. Middletown is interested in the abandoned Midway Pier and surrounding 5.6 acres of waterfront property, now an unpaved parking lot at Greene Lane and Burma Road.

"The particular park is really the gem of the West Side Master Plan," the Planning Commission's detailed recommendations for improvements to the island's west shoreline, Dolen said. "It's a marvelous concept."

In a best-case-scenario, the Navy would transfer the property to the town at no-cost, although Dolen said it's most likely that the town would have to purchase the property at fair-market value.

"If it was our land that was taken away from us [by the Navy], why should we accept it?" Councilwoman M. Theresa Santos said. "Free and clear, for nothing," is how the town should get the property, she said.

"A case could be made for public-benefit transfer," Dolen replied. "We would certainly fight quite hard for that."

Council President Paul M. Rodrigues said the town should do its due diligence, including a thorough check of any remaining environmental concerns, before ultimately committing to owning the property.

Dolen said the Planning Commission is working with several entities, including the state's Department of Environmental Management, Coastal Resources Management Council and the Economic Development Corporation to plan for recreational use of the surplus Navy land.

CRMC executive director Grover J. Fugate, in a letter to Dolen, wrote that the CRMC "highly recommends and encourages that the Greene Lane project be the highest priority for the town and state action" because the park would create "an exceptional public access resource that will add immeasurably to the quality of life for Middletown citizens and all Rhode Islanders and visitors alike."

The DEM, Dolen said, is willing to accept the property from the Navy, but only on an interim basis. Dolen suggested the council express its willingness to take over long-term ownership and maintenance of the property, and she promised assistance, saying, "It's not as though Middletown

would have to bear the burden by itself." But the council did not specifically agree to that last night.

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