

Navy releases master plan for properties on Aquidneck Island

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By Richard Salit/The Providence Journal

NEWPORT — The Navy yesterday formally announced what area officials have been eagerly waiting to hear for years — that prime parcels of real estate in Portsmouth, Middletown and Newport will soon be declared surplus and eventually sold.

The news regarding the future sale of such properties as the former Naval Hospital in Newport and the vast tank farm sites on Burma Road came as the Navy announced the completion of a master plan to guide development at Naval Station Newport for the next 25 years.

The plan would also end the Navy's ownership of the Navy Lodge on West Main Road, all of Stringham Road, and Burma Road north of the Naval Undersea Warfare Center in Middletown. But despite an idea backed by area planners, the Navy does not plan to allow Burma Road to run through the base and connect with Coddington Highway, providing a more efficient north-south artery for automobiles.

All together, up to 384 of the Navy's 1,397 acres would be sold off.

While in no way downplaying the significance of the plans to sell properties, Navy officials yesterday said the report signals something of even greater importance: That long-term plans are being made to modernize Naval Station Newport and to preserve its vital role in the nation's military defense.

The plan outlines ongoing and imminent projects to tear down old buildings and construct new ones as well as proposed projects for which funding would have to be secured in the years ahead.

"This is a big deal," said Capt. Michael Poirier, the base commander. "The Navy is envisioning this place to be a place of excellence."

A vision statement included in the master plan states that "Naval Station Newport will be a world-class center of learning excellence supporting the Navy's mission by providing warfighters with the education, leadership, training and research, development, testing and evaluation capabilities to meet today's demands and exceed tomorrow's expectations."

That's a theme that has been repeated before and after the base realignment and closure (BRAC) process that not only spared Newport from being shut down or downsized several years ago, but brought the base many educational and training commands beyond the prestigious Naval War College.

The master plan, which envisions numerous projects to support those relocated programs, "demonstrates the Navy's commitment to Newport," said base spokeswoman Lisa Rama. "It's very encouraging."

Commands brought to Newport as a result of BRAC, and others that have moved here in the years since, will boost the number of full-time equivalent employees from the current 6,470 to 7,620.

Meanwhile, the number of students that come through Newport, which was 9,200 before BRAC, has increased to 13,000 this year and will rise to 16,400.

The relocated operations include several that are part of Officer Training Command, such as Officer Training School and Chief Warrant Officer/Limited Duty Officer School and Direct Commissioning Officer School. The Supply Corps School will arrive in about a year.

That growth is helping drive several projects either under construction or being designed. These include a new bridge between Coasters Harbor Island and the mainland, a combat-training pool complex, a training building for the Supply Corps schools, renovation of a dental clinic and new quarters for the maritime subsurface sensor operations facility.

Money is anticipated in the proposed fiscal 2009 budget for a new fitness complex. Funding will be sought for a variety of other projects, including transient bachelor quarters and replacement of administrative offices and housing for Officer Training Command.

It's too premature to put a price tag on all of the proposed projects, said Poirier. The total square footage of all of the Navy buildings is 6.2 million.

"Many of these buildings are planned, but it doesn't mean we will get them," Poirier said.

Naval station representatives gave a presentation on the plan yesterday morning to a group the Navy has been meeting with periodically and which is made up of city and town officials and business and planning leaders. Later in the day, a separate presentation was given to reporters. The report itself is not a public document because it contains sensitive military information, Poirier said.

Poirier said that the Navy, in developing its long-range future, took into consideration the West Side Master Plan that the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission put together to guide development along the island's western shoreline. That plan called for Burma Road, also known as Defense Highway, to be enhanced with sidewalks, a bike path and wooden guide rails. It also proposed improving the hairpin junction of Burma and Stringham roads.

The West Side study also recommended redeveloping 350 acres of Navy land for marine industries and housing.

"I'm a fan of the plan," said Poirier, who described it as establishing "a framework for us."

By collaborating with local officials, he said, "We tried to make this a very open process."

But he said that extending Burma Road through the Navy base would conflict with plans to build new quarters for the relocated Army Reserves, whose arrival will increase from 600 to 1,000 the total number of reservists who visit the base for periodic training. The building is currently being designed.

Other highlights of the plan include the departure of two mothballed aircraft carriers, the Forrestal, which will be sunk at sea to serve as an artificial reef, and the Saratoga, which is expected to relocate to Quonset Point and become a museum.

The pier where the carriers are docked, as well as one nearby, are in need of repair and no longer needed. Both would be demolished. Three displaced Coast Guard vessels would be relocated to an adjacent wharf after its renovation.

Among the most desirable surplus properties are the naval hospital, which sits on seven acres of waterfront property overlooking the Claiborne Pell Bridge and includes a stone pier and rights to three underwater acres. The others are four tank farms off Burma Road, on scenic seaside sites in Portsmouth and Middletown. The Navy may retain 30 acres at two of the sites for renewable energy projects which, Poirier notes, is the same use recommended at that location by the West Side Master Plan.

Poirier emphasized that any properties identified in the Navy plan as surplus must now go through a complex process. That includes publication of legal notices, establishment of a local redevelopment authority and environmental cleanups.

“It is the Navy’s intention to make the property ready for its new use as quickly as possible,” said Cornelia Mueller, the base’s environmental scientist.

The Navy plan was prepared over 16 months by the Alexandria, Va., office of EDAW, an architecture and environment consulting company. The last time such a plan was undertaken was in 1986.