

# Navy's plans to free up nearly 400 acres

August 1, 2008

By Joe Baker

Daily News staff

The new Newport Naval Station master plan identifies up to 384 acres of Navy land that will be declared surplus property.

Developed by an independent company, the master plan is a guide for the Navy in how it utilizes its property on Aquidneck Island. It is the first base master plan since 1986 and is intended to guide development on the base for the next 25 years.

Of most interest to local officials is confirmation by the Navy that it intends to release land in all three island communities. The decision includes: the 10-acre parcel that was the site of the former Naval Hospital in Newport, the former Navy Lodge site at the corner of West Main Road and Connell Highway in Middletown and four of the five tank farms in Portsmouth.

The move comes as no surprise to local officials. Navy officials informed local leaders in March that they intended to release the land. Local officials have long eyed the various parcels and have discussed various options for their development.

The master plan also indicates the Navy's commitment not only to staying on Aquidneck Island, but also to growth, said Naval Station Newport Commanding Officer Capt. Michel Poirier.

"This is a big deal," Poirier said at a briefing for reporters Thursday afternoon. "The Navy is envisioning this base to be a place of excellence in training and education and research and development."

The plan presents a series of recommendations for new building on the base that, if eventually approved, would make it difficult for the Navy to abandon its Newport base, Poirier said. It also shows that the base work force has increased even more than anticipated after the 2005 Base Relocation and Closure Commission report. That report identified about 500 new jobs at the local base because of the relocation of several Navy commands to Newport. But subsequent decisions by the Navy will result in a total increase of about 1,150 jobs by 2010, Poirier said.

"This indicates a plan and desire to invest in the area," Poirier said. "There's a pretty substantial lay-down of new facilities here."

Already being built are a bridge connecting Coaster Harbor Island and Coddington Point, a combat training pool and a training building for the Navy Supply Corps School. Funding is in place for a new base fitness center and a hazardous waste storage building. The master plan identifies a series of additional facilities that will be placed on the base's priority list for future federal budgets.

Portsmouth Town Council President Dennis Canario, who attended part of a Thursday morning briefing for local officials, was pleased with the recommendations.

"There are a lot of exciting things going on (on the base)," Canario said. "The growth they show is very impressive and will bring in more people to the base."

Canario also was excited by the news that the tank farms, totaling 124 acres, eventually will be released and put back on Portsmouth's tax rolls. The report also officially identified another 35 acres, between the two boating villages in Melville, for public release.

Portsmouth officials already have established a local redevelopment agency — a federal requirement for release of military property — that will oversee reuse of that land. They envision a combination of commercial, recreational and residential uses of the property.

"This opens up doors and (job) opportunities for the people who live here in town," Canario said. "It puts us in the driver's seat for what happens to that property."

The report did say the Navy might keep up to 30 acres of the tank farm property for possible "renewable energy projects."

Officials from Newport and Middletown could not be reached for comment.

The plan also indicates the Navy will demolish the two piers at Coddington Cove once the two mothballed aircraft carriers anchored there are moved. The Saratoga eventually will be turned into a floating museum, Poirier said, and the Forrestal will be sunk and used as a reef in an as-yet-to-be determined location. The three Coast Guard cutters tied to the piers will remain in the cove, but will use renovated berthing along the waterfront, Poirier said.

The plan recommends that the Navy not release land necessary to link Defense Highway, commonly called Burma Road, and Connell Highway. Poirier said the Navy plans on locating a new Army Reserve Center on that piece of land and security concerns preclude release of the

property.