

Navy's plan for Burma Road vexes Aquidneck Island

Tuesday August 5, 2008

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City and town officials are enthusiastically greeting the unveiling of a master plan for Naval Station Newport, praising its ambitious plans to demolish old buildings and construct new ones as well as its recommendation to sell off hundreds of acres of prime real estate.

But the community leaders also expressed disappointment at the Navy's reluctance to allow Burma Road to be extended to Coddington Highway through a section of the base, a move that would provide an additional north-south transportation corridor on Aquidneck Island.

The Navy presented the highlights of the plan to island leaders at a meeting last Thursday, followed later in the day by a briefing for reporters. The plan, which is intended to guide development at the base for the next 25 years, confirmed the Navy's interest in designating properties in Newport, Middletown and Portsmouth as surplus. The key properties include the shuttered Naval Hospital on Newport's waterfront and the former tank farm sites off scenic Burma Road in Portsmouth.

"It was long awaited. We were working on this since 1999," said Portsmouth planner Bob Gilstein. "We're excited because all of the work we have been putting in toward this. Now the race is on. We're ready to go. We're psyched."

The Navy wants to sell about 300 acres in Portsmouth, including 35 acres next to the Melville marina district and two tanks farms totaling about 150 acres north of Stringham Road. Two other tanks farms, on about 125 acres across Burma Road from the waterfront Carr Point Recreation Area, are also identified as surplus land, but the Navy is saying it might retain about 30 acres from one of the sites for renewable energy projects.

"That's great, because we were thinking of something like that anyway," said Gilstein.

ONE OF THE SITES, called Tank Farm 3, is where the town envisioned the possible construction of a sewage-treatment plant, a desalination plant and a wind turbine. But if the Navy wants to retain most of this site, he said the town would be pleased to acquire Tank Farm 4 for the same uses.

"They did say they would give us a copy of the wind studies they are doing," he said. "Their studies will show whether it's feasible."

The Navy, he said, has indicated that it won't hold up selling off the other properties if its studies of Tank Farms 3 and 4 will take substantial time to complete.

The other sites, Gilstein said, "have far more obvious uses" because the Melville marina district "is bursting at the seams. They need more space." In addition, he said, the proposed Weaver Cove marina development could also create additional demand for surrounding land. Development

opportunities at these locations may also be welcomed by the defense industry, he said.

In Newport, city officials and developers have had their eye on the long-defunct naval hospital site, which overlooks Narragansett Bay and the Claiborne Pell Bridge. The 10-acre site includes several historic buildings, a stone pier and rights to three acres underwater.

A DECADE AGO, the city acquired land from the Navy and transformed it into what is now the home of a Community College of Rhode Island campus and an early-childhood education center. BankNewport's headquarters will soon move into a new building at the site too. Paige Bronk, the city's planning director, said that would serve as the model for how the city would like to handle the hospital property.

"We would like to secure it, own it, plan for its redevelopment and have a private developer complete the development that is in accordance with our plans," he said. "The former Navy hospital would be a huge feather in our cap if we could secure the property and develop it into something that is beneficial to Newport and the private sector. There could be public access, jobs, mixed-used development and some water-related or marine-dependent uses. This is a gem of a piece of property."

Reflecting on the Navy's overall plans, Bronk said, "I don't think there were too many surprises. The [surplus] land areas that were described in the plan were pretty much what I think all three communities were anticipating. The surprising part is the large number of capital improvements that are desired on Naval Station Newport, granted they are unfunded at this time."

The Navy identified several ongoing projects to tear down and construct new buildings as the base continues its transformation into a center for education and training — one rooted in the historical presence of the Naval War College, but which is growing with the arrival of Officer Candidate School and other school-related commands. The plan also identified construction projects for which it is currently seeking financing as well as others envisioned for the future.

"The island, all three communities, desire to have Naval Station Newport maintain itself as a strong military installation because it supports a fourth community on the island," Bronk said. "It provides a tremendous socio-economic base to the island as well and provides benefits in terms of jobs and housing."

THE OTHER SURPRISE, said Bronk, was the Navy's decision not to allow Burma Road to intersect with Coddington Highway. Island leaders had hoped that the two main roads could be joined by having Navy give up a base road known as Simonpietri Drive. That would be in addition to another planned improvement to the north-south artery — improving the sharp turn at the intersection of Burma and Stringham roads.

"They were well aware of the island's desire and I think they were interested, at one time. For whatever reason, they changed their mind. They have a right to. ...if they feel it's essential for the road to not go through," Bronk said. "I kind of feel that's the end of the road for that concept, at least for now."

Gilstein said he was prepared for the bad news about Burma Road, which means its southern end will continue to intersect with already congested West Main Road in Middletown. The Navy said last week that it could not give up land in the area of Simonpietri Drive because of plans for a new Army Reserve building that will bring about 400 reservists to the base for periodic training.

"I've been hearing how difficult it would be to do that," Gilstein said. "They said they looked at it every which way. ... For the peak summer tourist season, it's disappointing. Middletown needed

more relief than us.”

Still, the Navy wants to give up its ownership of Stringham and Burma roads, meaning maintenance of the roadways would be turned over to either the state or the local communities.

“It’s been made clear to us it’s part of the package,” said Gilstein. “If we had our druthers, we’d have somebody else take care of the road.”

MANY PARTS of the Navy plan mirror the West Side Master Plan, which called for adding a bike path and sidewalks to Burma Road, and turning it into a “shoreline drive.”

“The inability to create a through-travel connection along the Navy’s Simonpietri Drive to Coddington Highway remains a formidable challenge for the Shoreline Drive concept,” Tina Dolen, executive director of the commission, said in a statement.

Dolen said the commission worked collaboratively with Navy brass as well as city and town officials as both plans were developed.

“The release of 384 acres presents a remarkable opportunity for the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission West Side Task Force and its community partners Newport, Middletown and Portsmouth to implement the commission’s West Side Master Plan,” she said.

Middletown Town Manager Shawn J. Brown said in a statement that Capt. Michael Poirier, the base commander, kept the town “well informed of the U.S. Navy’s intentions” and that “we have had a good idea of how the plan would shake out for some time now.”

He said the community “will benefit from having some of the finest service personnel in the military visiting or stationed on Aquidneck Island.”

Brown said one Navy proposal — redirecting commercial traffic entering the base from Coddington Highway to the Gate 17 Access Road — “will have a negative impact on the already heavily traveled West Main Road. This proposal is complicated by the fact that the island communities are already experiencing difficulties as a result of weight restrictions placed upon commercial vehicles crossing the Sakonnet River Bridge.”

THE LOCAL OFFICIALS don’t expect that any land will be given up soon or for free.

Unlike the Coddington Highway land Newport was simply given, “It’s been made perfectly clear that the land from the Department of Defense is not free,” said Bronk. He said that “market rate” is the term he commonly hears.

The Navy will soon issue notice identifying the land as surplus, making it available first to other federal agencies. Meanwhile, communities must establish a “local redevelopment authority” to create plans for surplus properties that take into consideration community consensus and the needs of the homeless. Brown said the three communities would pull together to form a regional authority. The plan it produces will be submitted to the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The Navy must also undertake environmental cleanups at the surplus properties.

“They have done a lot of [environmental] work over the past decade,” said Gilstein, referring to the tank farm sites. He noted that “the bureaucracy of it takes a lot longer than the [actual]

cleanup.”

When asked how long it might take for the Navy to actually transfer ownership of its properties to the town, he said, “two years — bare minimum.”