

Follow the blue trail

August 6-8, 2008

By Jill Rodrigues/East Bay RI

A conceptual water path for paddlers will connect Narragansett Bay's many gems

Tina Dolen of the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission paddles away from Portsmouth's Dyer Island during a tour of the "blue trail" mapped out by the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission. In the background is a homemade "sculpture" made of empty plastic jugs, a mooring marker and some other objects left behind by some visitors.

There aren't many trails that can boast stunning views of the sailboats on Newport Harbor, the golfers at Carnegie Abbey or the terns on Dyer Island.

But you'll be able to see it all from a planned scenic path along the west shore of Aquidneck Island. Don't lace up those walking shoes or put air in your bike tires, however. You'll need a kayak or canoe to traverse this route.

It's called a "blue trail" and while some may scoff at the idea - after all, you've always been able to paddle these areas - the people behind the concept say there's a higher purpose being served. With the first two kayak put-ins scheduled to be dedicated this month, the public would eventually have nine launching spots along the trail plotted out by the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission (AIPC).

"We want to show that this is a pristine waterfront area and we hope to use it for a lot of recreation projects, pedestrian paths as well as a bike path and fishing areas. Basically it's a message that public access to the shore will be preserved forever" something we'll have for our kids and grandkids," said Dr. Robert Quigley, vice-chairman of the AIPC, a regional agency that helps coordinate land use planning among Portsmouth, Middletown, Newport, Naval Station Newport and other civic, state and federal groups.

The blue trail is the first component of the AIPC's West Side Master Plan, a collaborative effort between federal, state and local partners that was launched in 2005. The ambitious, 350-page report outlines recommendations regarding transportation, utilities, economic development and land use across 10 miles of waterfront property.

There's much more work to be done on the plan as the AIPC, which doesn't own any of the land, is still waiting for Navy land to be exsessed and other properties transferred through conveyances for public access. "To be completed the way we envision it ... there are many unknowns," acknowledged Dr. Quigley.

Last week the Navy formally announced it will sell off prime surplus property - nearly 400 of its 1,400 acres. The news, which island officials have been expecting for years, is part of the Navy's own master plan that will guide the development of Naval Station Newport over the next quarter of a century.

The AIPC is excited to be making the first splash with its blue trail, which was envisioned through a mandate from local residents. Tina Dolen, executive director of AIPC, said during hearings on the plan, the public made it clear that easy access to the shoreline was a top priority.

“So, the blue trail was conceived,” said Ms. Dolen. “It’s a conceptual trail; there are no markings in the water. However, there will be nine launch sites from Portsmouth all the way down to Newport so people can stop, put in and take a walk around and enjoy the area.”

The first two put-in spots are at the Weaver’s Cove boat launch off Burma Road and at the end of Cory’s Lane, both in Portsmouth. The sites were scheduled to be officially dedicated at a ceremony last week, but the festivities were postponed out of respect to the family of fisherman Philip Ruhle Sr., whose memorial service was held that day. Mr. Ruhle captained the 80-foot Sea Breeze of Newport, which capsized and sank off New Jersey July 23. The AIPC has rescheduled the ceremony for Aug. 22.

Ms. Dolen gave a reporter a preview tour of a few stops along the blue trail last week. Starting from Weaver’s Cove, she paddled to Dyer Island for a brief visit before heading over to an old Navy refueling pier at Greene Lane in Middletown and then back to Portsmouth. Waters were calm and boat traffic was virtually nonexistent, although it was only about 8:30 a.m. on a weekday.

With every stop along the trail, there will be something new to see, she said. The state-owned Dyer Island in Portsmouth (see related story), is a “cool little spot” that’s a breeding ground for terns and other shorebirds, while paddlers further south can stop at Rose Island in Newport Harbor and view its restored lighthouse up close, or at the former Navy hospital site, “which will be redeveloped into a public access area and mixed-use development by the City of Newport,” she said.

With its overgrown brush and dilapidated pier, the Green Lane site doesn’t look like much now, but plans call for extending the pier by about 150 feet as well as developing a park at the six-acre site, which already has a handsome beach. Ms. Dolen noted that the West Side Master Plan also calls for walking and bike paths along the existing railway.

“The bike path would go right by here, and the train could stop here,” she said, pointing to the railroad tracks directly behind the pier. “So you could conceivably paddle from Portsmouth down to Newport, bring your boat up, put it on the train, then go back to Portsmouth.”

Unique concept

Similar to a bike path, only on water, blue trails are not unheard of throughout the rest of the United States. “There are a couple of comparable projects in Maine; they have a trail system, and in Colorado you have a riverine system of some magnitude,” said Michael Sullivan, director of the state Department of Environmental Management (DEM).

In Rhode Island, however, the concept is unique. “(The AIPC) trail is really the first formally designated blue trail in Rhode Island,” said Meg Kerr, treasurer of the Rhode Island Blueways Alliance, a grassroots organization which brings together diverse interests throughout the state to identify water trails to link the state’s rivers, lakes and ponds to Narragansett Bay.

Among the people the group talks to are kayak and canoe outfitters. “They see this as a way to promote their business, promote tourism,” Ms. Kerr said.

The outdoor gear company REI, in fact, recently granted funds so the Alliance could go forward with plans for another blue trail: The Roger Williams Paddle Trail, which starts at Freedom Green Park on the Ten Mile River in East Providence and heads into Providence.

Dr. Sullivan of DEM - whose slogan regarding the blue trails project is “a pier a year,” was among

the dignitaries who took part in the paddle. It was an eye-opening experience for him. “Providence is a much different city when you come through that portal; it’s bigger and more vibrant, he said, adding that the blue trails give the public an opportunity to see things from a different perspective.

“You can see some exciting sites and some disturbing sites,” said Dr. Sullivan, noting the time he paddled about seven miles around a portion of Aquidneck Island, from Middletown to Tiverton. “You see the million-dollar house rising out of a 5,000-square-foot lot, marvelous fish and wildlife, the rich and famous playing golf, the ugly legacy of industrial use or military use.”

Historical landmarks

The educational component of the blue trails project will be significant, said Ms. Dolen, noting that each launch site will include kiosks with signs and maps explaining the trail’s background with historical notes on the Revolutionary, Civil and World wars. (The signs and other work on the blue trail was funded by a \$15,000 grant from the van Beuren Charitable Foundation and part of a larger grant from the Prince Charitable Trust.)

But most importantly, the trails are a tribute to the wonders of Narragansett Bay. “We want people out on the water to enjoy all the resources that it has to offer,” said Ms. Kerr.

For Dr. Sullivan, it’s time more people got up close and personal with the bay by grabbing a paddle and jumping into a kayak or canoe.

“Far too many people only get to see Narragansett Bay from 195 and 295,” he said.

For more information about the blue trail and the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, visit www.aquidneckplanning.org.